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THE WIDOWER

THE WIDOWER

A NOVEL

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF
MATRIMONY, THE DANCER IN YELLOW,
A VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK, ETC.

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1898

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THE WIDOWER.

CHAPTER I.

A FRESH DEPARTURE.

It was in the month of March that Mrs. Pennant's long illness and comparatively short life ended, with some effect of suddenness, at Girgenti, in Sicily, whither she and her husband had betaken themselves to evade the rigours of winter. Her health, to be sure, had for more than a year been in such a condition that the doctors had ceased to speak of her ultimate recovery; but neither the doctors nor Mr. Pennant, nor the invalid herself, had supposed that she was in any immediate danger. However, a chill, the result of her own imprudence in insisting upon sitting out of doors after sunset one fine evening, brought about her death almost before those around her had time to realize that she was dying.

"And a very good thing, too," was Lady Wardlaw's remark when the news reached London.

"My dear Jane!" remonstrated Sir William from the other side of the breakfast table.

"I waited until the servants were out of the room," said Lady Wardlaw.

"Yes; but really, you know—poor woman!"

"Oh, poor woman, as much as you like! But it has been poor James for a good deal longer than *I* have liked, and I am not going to pretend that I am sorry to hear of his being set free at last. Now perhaps his life may begin. When all is said, he has hardly yet reached the prime of it, notwithstanding these unfortunate, wasted years."

Sir William lighted a cigarette and gazed out at the bare trees of Berkeley Square, in which desirable quarter his town residence was situated. "I suppose," he remarked meditatively, "James will marry again."

Sir William was a small man, with thin, dust-coloured hair, short-sighted gray eyes, and a waxed mustache. In obedience to a fashion which was at that time just beginning to be adopted, he wore a crimson plush smoking suit, and most people would have pronounced him at first sight to be a somewhat effeminate person. In reality, he was stronger and more wiry than he looked, as friends who had been in his company on Scottish moors and deer forests could have testified. His age was a complete puzzle to all who were introduced to him until they reached home and looked him up in the red book, wherein he appeared as: "Sir William, 7th bart., eld. s. of 6th bart., *b.* 1848, *m.* 1874 Jane Constantia, only dau. of late Adml. Sir George Pennant, G. C. B." Jane Constantia, who had the appearance of being considerably his junior, was betrayed by no red books, since she was not of noble birth; but she would willingly have told anybody who cared to know that she had

celebrated her thirtieth birthday. She was a lady of frank, open countenance and free speech, already inclining toward *embonpoint*, but holding herself erect and pleasant to look upon, with her fresh complexion, her white teeth, and her bright brown eyes, though she had never been accounted handsome.

"He *must*—naturally," she remarked, in reply to her husband.

Sir William, after taking time for reflection, didn't quite see why he should, unless he chose.

"Well, situated as he is, it is scarcely a question of choice. Only the one child—and she a girl. The property is entailed, you know."

"So you think it's his duty to have a lot of children? Well may you call him poor James! If there is a luckless being whom I pity from the bottom of my heart, it's a man whose house is infested with squalling brats. Personally, I would rather let my property go to the Crown than spend my earthly existence in such a premature purgatory."

Childless Lady Wardlaw laughed. In days gone by she had sometimes winced a little under her husband's rather clumsy efforts to console her for what they both in their hearts felt to be a trial; but now she did not dislike to hear him say that sort of thing. It was a reminder, if a needless one, of the solid mutual affection and friendship which subsisted between him and her.

"But, setting aside all considerations of worldly expediency," she resumed, "one does wish James to have a suitable wife and a comfortable home of his own. How many years is it—it can't be much

less than ten—that he has been houseless and homeless, trapesing all over Europe at the bidding of a wife who was unsuited to him in every possible way?"

"I only saw her once," observed Sir William musingly. "I thought her awfully good-looking."

"She was a perfectly detestable woman," said Lady Wardlaw, with decision.

"Perhaps he didn't think so."

"Ah, that is what nobody will ever know."

"Nobody ever will if you don't, that's certain. I take it that James Pennant has just one intimate friend in the world, and far be it from me to deny that he made a wise selection when he appointed his cousin Jane to the post."

"He might have made a worse one," Lady Wardlaw agreed. "But although James writes to me on an average once a fortnight, he doesn't tell me things. I know no more than you do what he really thought of his Ada; I only suspect."

"Well, whatever she may have been, she is dead now," observed Sir William, who was one of the most kind-hearted of mortals. He added, after a pause, "One must admit that there is a certain aptness about her demise at this particular moment. So long as that irreconcilable old man lived, her gadding about the Continent didn't matter; James was as well abroad as at home. But Abbotswell couldn't have been left standing empty forever, and this change seems to solve the difficulty. Pity the girl isn't a boy."

Lady Wardlaw was not so sure that it was a pity. "James is queer and reticent, and extraordinarily

sensitive under his impassive exterior. And his experiences of matrimony must have left him raw and bleeding. If he had a son and heir, he might be capable of shutting himself up drearily in a corner of that big house till the end of his days, rather than risk a second plunge. Whereas, now that the duty of begetting a son and heir is so obvious, his life, as I say, must be only on the verge of starting."

"Quite so," assented Sir William. "And who is she, if it isn't indiscreet to inquire?"

Lady Wardlaw laughed. "Oh, there are dozens of her—half dozens, anyhow; I haven't had time to fix upon any special one yet. Besides, it isn't only domestic joys that are his due; with abilities like his he will have to become a public man and make himself heard of in the world. I don't suppose you realize a bit what a bright light has been quenched by that fatal extinguisher of an Ada ever since James Pennant threw himself away upon her."

"H'm! He has no ear for music," remarked Sir William.

"Great men scarcely ever have, unless they happen to be Jews. A few pretend to be musical, and I have watched some of them at Richter concerts, following the score in the wrong place. No; it's unfortunate, but it's a fact, that statesmanship and artistic sensibility don't go together."

"So James is to be a statesman, is he? I wish him joy of the job. Likewise, I wish him joy of the plain-headed woman who is destined to sit at the head of his table. You mean her to be a plain-headed one, Jane; you know you do."

"I mean her," Lady Wardlaw declared emphatically, "to be a decent woman and a good wife. It is a great deal more important for her to be that than to be a beauty."

"Perhaps it is. I wonder whether he will kick. Meanwhile, it might be as well to avoid allusions to her in your letter of condolence."

"Good gracious! What do you take me for?"

Sir William opened his lips, but closed them again without audible response. If he doubted his wife's discretion—and in truth he did—why should he hurt her feelings by telling her so? For the rest, she was likely enough, he thought, to bring her amiable intentions to a successful issue. She had great influence with James, and her influence would be exerted in what, after all, must be pronounced the right direction. Then he remembered Mrs. Arthur Pennant, with her boy, who was at present heir presumptive to the Abbotswell estate, and he said to himself, "I shouldn't wonder if we were to witness some ructions over this business." Aloud, he contented himself with remarking that, in any case, James Pennant would have to make up his mind to fresh departures.

At that selfsame moment James Pennant, standing beside the open window of the hotel at Girgenti, and staring out at the blue sea with eyes which transmitted no impression of the prospect before them to a preoccupied brain, was in the act of contemplating fresh departures. These evidently had to be contemplated; nor was there very much doubt as to the shape which they must assume. Abbotswell, any-

how—the home of his boyhood, unvisited by him (owing to adverse circumstances) for a matter of ten years past and, since his father's death a twelvemonth back, his own property—must of course be henceforth his abode. Ada would never have consented to live at Abbotswell—had, indeed, declared unequivocally that, rather than do that, she would set up a separate establishment abroad. But Ada, poor soul, lay silent in a corner of the sunny cemetery, where the English chaplain had read the burial service over her coffin some days ago; so that there was no longer a question of her living anywhere, nor anything to prevent an expatriated country gentleman from responding to the call of duty as soon as he liked.

Only a month, or even a fortnight, earlier James would have said without hesitation that he asked nothing better than to obey that call, desired nothing more ardently than to turn his back forever upon the wandering life of which he had been made so heartily sick; but now that he was at liberty to give effect to his wishes, he felt a little less sure of them. English country life, under gray skies, with its accompaniment of hunting, shooting, rent audits, quarter sessions, dinners with dull neighbours, and so forth—all this did not seem to smile upon him, somehow. Perhaps his long exile had unfitted him for such pursuits; perhaps he had certain rather absurd compunctions, as though, by yielding to the inevitable, he would be guilty of a species of treachery to his dead wife. His dead wife had been more than once guilty of treachery—or something closely resembling it—to him; but that was a reflection upon which he

did not care to dwell. He had buried with her the memory of her ceaseless flirtations, of the incipient scandals which he had been forced to check by flitting from one European capital or watering place to another, of her caprices and extravagances, of the miserable, ignoble bickerings which even his imperturbable self-control had not wholly availed to obviate; he preferred to remember the early days of their married life, when they had been perfectly happy together (knowing so little of one another!), and he said to himself remorsefully that if he had not been what he was, Ada would doubtless have been very different from what she had become.

But neither philosophy, nor religion, nor sage resolutions, nor any other agency known to man can prevent a single one of us from being what he is, and if Mrs. Pennant could have returned from the dead, the old estrangement, the old subdued antagonism, all the old troubles would speedily have returned also. James knew it, and that knowledge added something to the poignancy of a regret which was not the less genuine because it had already entered upon a conflict with relief in which it was sure to be worsted.

"I am a brute!" he exclaimed. "I was hard to her while she lived, and I don't know that I am not going to be even harder to her now that she is gone. I suppose the truth is that I dislike women too much to judge them fairly. I wonder whether that is because I understand them or because I don't."

If he did not understand them particularly well,

the fault was scarcely his. With certain failings appertaining to their sex he had been rendered painfully familiar, while the countervailing merits which every impartial observer must acknowledge had not chanced to be conspicuously brought under his notice. A man is, and must be, the creature of his experience, and James Pennant's unfortunate experience pointed to the conclusion that women have little sense of honour or justice, little or no regard for truth. There was Jane Wardlaw, to be sure—but no rule is without exceptions.

Well, be the other sex what it might, his own, at all events, could not pretend to ignore certain elementary obligations, and it is the first duty of every gentleman to keep his word. Ada, just before her death, had stretched out her wasted arms and drawn his head down to her. "James," she had gasped, "the child!" And, understanding very well the scared, imploring look in her eyes, and all that her labouring breath could not utter, he had answered, "Yes; I promise. Cuckoo shall not suffer in any way that I have it in my power to prevent."

He disliked that nickname of Cuckoo, which Ada had bestowed upon the little girl—there had been so many things which he had disliked and his wife had liked! But he was loyally determined to maintain it; determined also to replace to the best of his ability that irreplaceable endowment—a mother's love and care. He rang the bell and told the waiter who answered it to send the young lady to him. He had scarcely seen her since the funeral.

At the expiration of five minutes or so the door

opened and in trotted a small person, smothered in black crape, with closely cropped brown hair, a turned-up nose, and eyes of remarkable size and brilliancy. She had the air of being tempted to break into smiles, but conscious that decency forbade her to yield to the temptation. Advancing quickly toward the spare, clean-shaven man who had now seated himself beside a writing table, she took possession of his hand and began:

"Father, you must not grieve any more for mother, because she has gone to heaven, which is much better for her than being alive and ill; and—and you have me."

James lifted the child up and placed her upon his knee. "Who told you to say that, Cuckoo?" he asked.

She replied unhesitatingly, "Budgie. Didn't I say it right?"

"Quite right; only in future I should like you to say just what is in your own mind, not what Budgett or anybody else may consider appropriate."

Cuckoo probably did not know the meaning of the word appropriate, but she was glad of the permission to state what was in her own mind, and she lost no time in profiting by it.

"Mayn't Budgie and me go down to the beach again now?" she asked, "and mayn't I have the dolls out? We've put them all in mourning."

"Of course," answered James, "why should you stay indoors?"

The child had cried bitterly, and had been very sorry, and was now consoled; it did not follow that

she was heartless. Assuming a child's day to be equivalent to one of our weeks—which is really a moderate enough computation—the time had doubtless come for Cuckoo to do as we must all needs do when the first sharpness of a bereavement has worn off, and pick up the dropped thread of actual existence once more. But he had one or two things to say to her before he let her go, and he tried to say them, though speech of that kind never came very easily to him. He wanted Cuckoo to understand that since he and she had now only one another in the world, they must be closer and more confidential friends than they had hitherto been; he wanted to make it clear that, so far as in him lay, he would henceforth be a mother as well as a father to her; above all, he wanted to impress upon the child that she must never be afraid of him. That she had been afraid of him he was well aware; many people were so, and he was accustomed to being considered formidable, though he scarcely knew what he had done to earn the reputation.

Cuckoo could have told him. While she sat on his knee, playing with his watch chain and studying, at unwontedly close quarters, his clear, refined features (James Pennant had been, and still was, a handsome man—black haired, gray eyed, with firm lips, which had never been concealed by a mustache, and a slightly prominent chin), she may have been thinking to herself that her father's loquacity was something quite new. It was his habitual silence that rendered him terrible—that and the impossibility of ever making him lose either his patience or his tem-

per. Whether she appreciated much of the intention of his discourse may be doubted; but she put her arms round his neck presently and kissed him, taking advantage of that tender attitude to whisper in his ear, "Father, isn't it wrong for people whose wives die to marry somebody else?"

James smiled. "Budgett again?" said he. "No, my dear, it isn't wrong; but it is often rather foolish. As for me, I gave up being foolish a great many years ago, you will be glad to hear. Now run away, with your dolls, but don't stay out after the sun has gone down." He added, as an afterthought, "By the way, when you come in you might tell Budgett that I should like to speak to her for a few minutes."

Budgett lifted up her voice and wept aloud on receiving the above message. She had been the late Mrs. Pennant's confidential maid; her ostensible occupation was gone; she suspected that her master had no great liking for her, and nothing seemed to her more probable than that she was about to be given a formal intimation of his ability to dispense with her future services. Cuckoo, moved by the woman's distress, roared in sympathy, declaring that if her dear Budgie were to be sent away she would go too; but Mr. Pennant, it subsequently appeared, had no such fell intentions as were imputed to him. When Budgett, red in the face and swollen as to the eyelids, presented herself, he made haste to allay the fears which he divined.

"I have decided," said he, "that it will not be necessary for you to leave us, Budgett, unless you wish to do so. Miss Cuckoo hardly requires a nurse

now and will, I suppose, require a maid before very long. Meanwhile, as a sort of personal attendant——"

"I could not think of leaving the dear child, sir," interrupted Budgett, who was less afraid of James than she was of losing her situation, and who judged it best to lead at once from her strong suit. "I look upon her as what I may term a sacred charge, bequeathed to my care almost at the last moment, and——"

Mr. Pennant checked her by raising his hand. "I am sure you will do your best, Budgett," he said, rather coldly. "Hitherto you have proved yourself a devoted servant, and your mistress, I know, had complete confidence in you."

"She had indeed, sir! She told me everything, and, as she often used to say, we was almost like sisters."

James did not believe that his wife had ever said anything of the kind. She had had frequent squabbles with her maid, for whom he personally entertained a rather strong feeling of antipathy. But he had a rather strong feeling of antipathy for most women, and this one, to do her justice, had not spared herself in nursing a somewhat querulous invalid.

"So that I shall be glad to keep you," he continued, "and to add ten pounds to your wages for the future, in acknowledgment of the help that you have recently given us. It will devolve upon you to take care of Miss Cuckoo, at all events until we reach England, for I do not propose to take the Italian nurse away from her own country."

Budgett thanked him, and added, "We are going to England, then, sir? I'm very glad of that."

James made a sign of assent. He was willing to believe that the woman's familiarity was not intentionally offensive. She was not a well-trained servant, this rather impudent-looking little person, with the sallow complexion and the exaggerated *coiffure;* but his wife had, for some reason or other, been fond of her, and she appeared also to have won the child's affections. He was about to terminate the audience by saying "That is all," when Budgett resumed:

"And I was to tell you, sir, that there is no more bills to come in—not as she could call to mind. But she never had any head for figures, poor dear!"

James made no reply; but he raised his eyes and gazed steadily at the speaker, who found herself outside the door before she knew where she was. Then he reverted to the occupation from which he had been turned aside by her entrance, and which chanced to be precisely that of examining Ada's unpaid bills. In spite of the assurance just conveyed to him, he knew that there would be more of them. It did not matter, now that he was well off, although it had mattered once, and trouble had been the result of bygone extravagances and concealments.

Did the mass of letters, addressed to the late Mrs. Pennant, which it was likewise his unpleasant duty to examine before destroying, matter? Apparently he did not think so, for he tore them to pieces after a mere glance at their opening and concluding words. Now, since those words unmistakably proved a large portion of them to be love letters, it will be perceived

that James must either have been an unusually complaisant husband or a man whose rigid sense of honour would not permit him to read what had not been meant for his eyes. The late Mrs. Pennant had had numerous charges to bring against him; but never in her life had it occurred to her to accuse him of being complaisant.

CHAPTER II.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

After all, James Pennant did not at once make for England. It was kind of Jane Wardlaw to be so eager for his return and to write him such sympathizing letters upon the subject; but he felt hardly ready yet even for Jane, and certainly not ready for Abbotswell, which, having stood empty for upward of a twelvemonth, might surely be left empty a little longer without detriment to anybody's interests. He wanted time to accustom and adjust himself to the completely altered conditions of life which he must soon face, and he did not want—well, in plain words, he did not want to be bothered.

He had been terribly bothered during the years that were now over and done with; so much so that he almost doubted whether he would be able to care for anything in the future, except peace and quietness. He was in his thirty-fourth year, and as likely as not to live for another thirty-four years, so that misgivings of that kind were palpably opposed to nature and common sense. Yet nothing could be more certain than that he would never be young again. If he had not wasted his whole life, he had at least thrown away that portion of it in which

alone a career can be initiated—a process which had, moreover, deprived him of all wish for a prominent career. Over and done with, like the years which had made an old man of him, were ambition, curiosity, the healthy, legitimate desire to win in the race of earthly existence, without which it is hardly worth anybody's while to have been born. It was a pity, of course, but there was no help for it. The marriage which his strait-laced old father could never be induced to condone (for in truth poor Mrs. James Pennant had not been quite a lady in birth, nor at all a good imitation of a lady in appearance and conduct) would doubtless have proved fatal to him even if it had turned out happily; and it had not turned out happily. In his silent, uncomplaining way, James had borne with Ada, remonstrating only when it became absolutely necessary to do so, complying as far as possible with her whims and caprices, converting himself into a useless, ignoble loafer because she averred that neither her health nor her spirits could hold out against residence in England; but the whole thing had broken his heart, and it is not at the age of four and thirty that a broken-hearted man can begin all over again.

However, the melancholy wisdom and experience which he had acquired might yet be of service to somebody else. In fact, the one important thing seemed to him to be that his wisdom and experience should be thus utilized, and that Cuckoo should be trained to become—he did not say to himself—as unlike her mother as possible; but he did say that he wanted her to grow up unlike the generality of

women. Hitherto he had seen and known surprisingly little of the child, for Ada's queer, jealous temperament had always taken umbrage at any attempt on his part to share in what she regarded as exclusively her own; but now he resolved that there should be a total change in that respect. Circumstances were propitious, and he could easily devote a few weeks, or even months, to making friends with one who must henceforth be his dearest friend and his sole absorbing interest.

So, instead of going straight home, he dawdled slowly through Italy, halting at Naples, Rome, and Florence, and settling down at length, on the advent of warm weather, at an hotel on the Lago Maggiore, where, at that early season of the year, he was in little danger of being annoyed by encounters with acquaintances. There was, happily, no difficulty about making friends with Cuckoo, who was then—and indeed she has never, up to this present moment, been anything else—the easiest little person in the world to get on with. James Pennant, who was by no means easy to get on with, soon found himself adoring her, such capital company was she, so winning were her ways, and so readily did she seem to fall in with the ideas which he strove to inculcate. Of these the chief and all-important one was, that it is a most disgraceful thing—an offence of which no gentleman can possibly be guilty—to tell a lie, and that what is usually qualified by the mild term of "exaggeration" is in reality neither more nor less than falsehood. Certain symptoms of a somewhat exuberant imagination on the child's part caused James to insist very strong-

ly upon that point, and she appeared to be duly impressed by what he said.

"I suppose grown-up people never tell lies, do they, father?" she asked one day.

James was sorry to be obliged to reply that many of them did.

"But not gentlemen?" said Cuckoo, interrogatively.

"No, not gentlemen. If I were to tell a lie I could not expect to be considered a gentleman any longer."

"Well," observed Cuckoo, with a meditative sigh, "Budgie isn't a gentleman. She *says* she is a lady; but——"

"Then she says what is not the case, and it is very silly of her to do so."

Budgett, it presently transpired, had been making numerous statements which were not only silly, but palpably apocryphal. It did not, for instance, seem altogether probable, even to the unsuspecting faith of childhood, that she was the scion of an ancient family, reduced, through pecuniary misfortunes for which that family were in no way to blame, to her present position of domestic servitude; nor was it quite easy to believe that in her last place she had always been treated as a friend, not as a lady's maid, accompanying her mistress on daily drives in a "beautiful open carriage and pair" and sitting down to dinner with her every evening; nor, again, was that story of her having refused repeated offers of marriage from "some of the highest in the land" of a nature to command ready and implicit credence.

"But I love her, all the same," Cuckoo wound up by declaring emphatically.

James, who disliked the woman, yet was conscious that she had served his wife faithfully and was still performing her duties with regard to the superintendence of Cuckoo's health and wardrobe in a manner which claimed his gratitude, was fain to reply that it is permissible to love even liars.

"Especially when they aren't gentlemen, or even ladies," pleaded Cuckoo. She added, after a moment, "And when they are so amusing!"

James laughed, and Cuckoo rubbed her hands. If Budgett amused her, she had discovered that she possessed the power of sometimes amusing her father, and this discovery was a delightful one to her. The grave, taciturn man, whose smiles, ever since she could remember him, had been so exceedingly rare, and who, as she had always been warned, was no lover of children, could unbend, it seemed, upon occasion. He was even capable of a certain mischievous boyishness, as when he took her out on the lake, instructed her in the manipulation of an oar, and was overwhelmed with merriment at the crabs which she caught. Moreover, her comments upon men, women, and things, together with her imitations of Budgett and of sundry sojourners in the hotel who had spoken to her (she was an excellent mimic and had a precocious sense of humour), evidently tickled him. All of which was most flattering and satisfactory.

"*I* am not afraid of father," Cuckoo boastfully

informed her personal attendant, who hastened to reply:

"Well, I'm sure *I'm* not—though there's many as would be."

But Cuckoo shook her head. "Oh, yes, you are, Budgie," she returned. "When he looks at you you run away, instead of getting up on his knee, as I do."

Budgett explained that at her age it would be unbecoming to resort to the method of ingratiation alluded to. "And you mustn't expect this to go on either, my dear," she added. "When we are in England your papa will have other things to do than to give up his time to little girls, and other people to talk to. For the present, it has to be you or nobody; so you had best not take it into your head that he can't get on without you."

Appearances, nevertheless, seemed to point to the permanence of Cuckoo's conquest. James himself was a little surprised and puzzled by the hold that the child had taken of him. "She might so easily have been a mere burden and a nuisance, as well as an anxiety," was what he thought. "I suppose I ought to be very thankful that I feel no temptation to regard her in that way."

He certainly was not tempted toward sentiments which most people would have pronounced unnatural, yet which would have struck those acquainted with his history (had there been any such) as by no means inexplicable. Pending the engagement of the governess, whom he foresaw to be an unpleasant necessity, he began giving the child daily lessons,

and found her an apt and intelligent, though desperately inattentive, pupil. He, on his side, was the most patient and long-suffering of teachers, never uttering a sharp word, in spite of the provocation which was undoubtedly given him at times. In after years Cuckoo remembered that, and the memory always brought tears into her eyes. In after years, also, James, recalling that quiet time—the lesson hours, when Cuckoo had been wont to edge up so close to him that her curly head generally ended by laying itself down on his shoulder; the warm evenings which were usually spent in a boat, he lazily sculling, and the child erratically steering; the scent of the orange flowers blown across the still water from the Isola Madre; the snowy, rosy Alps in the distance, beyond which Destiny lay in wait for a pair of recalcitrant victims—used to say to himself that those, after all, had been the very best days of his life. Perhaps in truth they were, though he forgot, no doubt, the anxieties, uncertainties, and misgivings with regard to the near future which helped to prevent them, while they lasted, from being so very unlike other days.

Anyhow, he found excuses to protract them as long as was possible—long enough for the avoidance of that sojourn in London which Jane Wardlaw urged upon him, and which it was his desire to shirk. Not until the middle of July did Cuckoo's eager eyes behold the white cliffs of Kent, and by the middle of July everybody who is not so unfortunate as to be a member of the House of Commons must admit that it is high time to go down to the country.

James Pennant made straight for Wiltshire, and on a fine starry night stepped once more over the threshold of the old home which for upward of ten years he had been too proud to cross. The doors of Abbotswell had, during his father's lifetime, been rigorously closed against his wife, and he had refused to visit his father alone, preferring that such meetings between them as had from time to time been found necessary should take place elsewhere.

By his orders, and in compliance with representations which had reached him, there had been some renewal of worn-out carpets and curtains, but otherwise everything was curiously, pathetically unchanged. The oak-panelled entrance hall, hung with family portraits of no great artistic merit, the vast dining room, with its long table, at one end of which a single lamp formed a small oasis of light, the library and the high-backed chair in which he remembered that his mother used, ages ago, to fall asleep uncomfortably every evening, the faint, all-pervading smell of *pot-pourri*—these things smote the heart of the new master with sorrow and something like remorse, for the fact is that he was a soft-hearted man, though seldom suspected of being so. When, after Cuckoo had been put to bed, he sat down and lighted a cigar in the so-called study, which old Mr. Pennant would never have allowed to be polluted by tobacco smoke, he realized for the first time the appalling sadness and solitude of his father's last years. *Sunt lachrymæ rerum!* It had been nobody's fault in particular, but a strictly upright and well-intentioned old gentleman had had a somewhat

hard sentence passed upon him. With one son gone to the bad—he had always spoken of his eldest son as having "gone to the bad"—with another killed stupidly, out hunting, at a fence which his horse had tried to rush, without a near relation or intimate friend of either sex, and with nothing to do except to discharge the humdrum duties belonging to his station as a country squire, he must surely often have longed for death and release.

"And his successor," mused James, "will follow pretty closely in his footsteps, I imagine. I wonder who *my* successor will be. Or, rather, I don't wonder; because, of course, bar accidents, he will be Fitzroy. He certainly won't be any son of mine—Jane Wardlaw may rest assured of that, charm she never so wisely—and Mrs. Arthur may dismiss her natural apprehensions."

He resumed, after a moment: "My father was not to blame, nor was I. I could not allow my wife to be slighted, and I daresay that if I had been in his place I could not have consented to receive her. Of course he heard things, as everybody did, and he felt bound to draw the line. I suppose I should have done the same. A man can but obey his conscience. Only I rather wish that mine would permit me to let Abbotswell."

But Abbotswell was a beautiful Tudor house, built upon a slight eminence, from which broad terraces and lawns, gay with brilliant flower beds, fell away to meet the expanse of well-timbered park beyond; so that James, who, during his long exile, had half forgotten how charming and how marvel-

lously green it all was, recanted his wish the moment that he looked out of his bedroom window on the following morning at the dewy prospect.

"It would be monstrous to let the dear old place to strangers," he ejaculated. "I don't believe I really want to let it—though I don't suppose I shall ever exactly want to live here either."

Cuckoo's wishes with regard to that point were soon formed and forcibly expressed. Abbotswell satisfied her soul. After a hurried but intelligent inspection of the premises, stables, and outbuildings, she announced with conviction that there was no place like home.

"There's horses and cows and pigs and hens and chickens," she breathlessly informed the owner of these treasures, "and Hopkins says there ought to be a pony for me to ride. Hopkins is the head coachman; I'll take you to see him, if you don't know him."

"I don't require the privilege of an introduction, thank you," answered James, with his grave smile. "I'll see about the pony. Hopkins is quite right; you must be taught to ride."

He meant to teach her a good many things in addition to reading, writing, history, and geography; he was pleased to discover that her tastes inclined her toward a manner of life which he conceived to be the most healthy and the most desirable for young people of both sexes. In forming plans for Cuckoo's future he forgot his own incurably uninteresting present.

Consequently, when Sir William and Lady Ward-

law arrived on a visit which they had thrown over other engagements in order to pay, they found their host in pretty good spirits. Intimately though she was acquainted with her cousin, and faithfully as she had corresponded with him for a number of years, Lady Wardlaw knew no more of him than he had chosen to tell her, and she had been rendered a little uneasy by his reluctance to return to England. What if, after all, he had contracted an unfortunate fancy for foreign habits? But his proclaimed determination to accept the position to which he had been called by birth reassured her.

"Of course you will, and of course you must," was her prompt rejoinder. "You would have to do that for your daughter's sake if you didn't for your own."

"Well, one has some other incentives and responsibilities; but in the main it is, as you say, more a question of Cuckoo than of anybody or anything else. Her life is beginning, whereas mine is, to all intents and purposes, over."

"My dear James, what nonsense!"

"No, it isn't nonsense, it's sober sense. But never mind me. Is a governess indispensable, do you think?"

"Well—unless you send her to school."

"Oh, I don't mean to send her to school. I wish I could send her to Eton; but as that can't be, what I want to do is to bring her up as nearly as possible like a boy. So I would fain avoid governesses, if I could."

"But you can't, and girls can't be converted into

boys," said Lady Wardlaw decisively. What, in her opinion, was at least as indispensable as a governess was a wife; but it was perhaps rather too soon to say so. She only added: "Your daughter seems to be a dear little thing. Not a bit like you in the face."

"She is none the worse for that."

"There is nothing the matter with your face that I know of. But she doesn't resemble——"

Lady Wardlaw stopped short, and James, who guessed what she had been going to say, looked annoyed for a moment. His voice, however, expressed no displeasure as he remarked: "She doesn't resemble the Pennants. I am not anxious that she should, for we have always been a perverse family. In the long run, I take it that she will be what her education has made her; and that is why her education must henceforth be my chief care, if not my only one."

It was upon the tip of Lady Wardlaw's tongue to declare that a man in the full vigour of life and intellect ought to be ashamed of himself if he can find no better employment for his time than futile attempts at interference with the operation of natural laws; but she bit her tongue and listened patiently to what her cousin had to say. It was not, to be sure, very surprising that he should have formed a poor opinion of her sex, or that he should desire his daughter's ethical standard to differ from that by which her mother's actions had presumably been regulated.

"James," she subsequently informed her husband, "is going in for misogyny. A tiresome form of mania, but, I hope, only a temporary one."

"He will be cured of it," Sir William predicted, "either by a clever widow or by some *ingénue* in her teens. One knows what inevitably happens to widowers who affect such aggressively deep mourning. James looks as if the housemaid blacked him every day after polishing the grates."

"He doesn't say a word about the late lamented," observed Lady Wardlaw pensively. "You think he is sure to marry again, then?"

"My dear Jane, I know that you are sure to make him, if nobody else does. But in any case, there would be no hope for the poor man; the house is obviously too big, and the dining table much too long. The whole thing cries aloud for pickaninnies. Personally, as you know, I detest children, but I confess to a sneaking fancy for Miss Cuckoo, whose little nose, one foresees, is destined to be put out of joint."

CHAPTER III.

THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE.

THE conquest of Sir William Wardlaw was one of a long series of victories which Cuckoo was destined to achieve over the sterner sex. From her earliest childhood, indeed, up to the present time of writing, no man has ever seriously attempted to resist her. If some reason must be assigned for this unvarying success it may be suggested that her complete immunity from shyness or self-consciousness, together with the instinctive facility which she has always displayed for adapting herself to the moods and tastes of the person nearest at hand, have probably had a good deal to do with it. Other and more obvious causes have, no doubt, contributed to the aforesaid result, but beauty of face or form can scarcely be reckoned amongst them. Cuckoo's looking-glass reflected at the period with which we are now concerned, and reflects still, the image of a rather thick-set little mortal, with a turned-up nose and a wide, humorous mouth. Only her large and very bright brown eyes have preserved her from being accounted downright plain.

"Which is rather bad luck," Sir William remarked, "for her mother was beautiful, and the

Pennants have been a handsome race from time immemorial."

The attraction which the child had for him personally he ascribed to the fact—he professed to have ascertained it to be a fact—that she had the love of all art, and especially of music, in her. Himself something of a dilettante, a collector of pictures, an authority upon old china, and a tolerably accomplished musician, he was wont to declare that he would not give a pin for any man or woman who was devoid of artistic sense, and the circumstance that a considerable number of persons who come under that denomination occupy prominent positions in public life did not deter him from pronouncing such persons to be radically stupid. Now, nobody could call Cuckoo Pennant stupid, although her ability to name the notes of a chord without looking at them when he struck the keys of the ancient Broadwood grand in the drawing room, was perhaps an insufficient ground for proclaiming her a genius. As a notorious hater of children, however, he had to give some explanation of his prolonged rambles through the gardens and shrubberies with James Pennant's queer, old-fashioned little girl, and his wife good-humouredly replied:

"Don't apologize; we aren't jealous. It is only when other people are out of the way that I can get James to talk at all, and even then——"

Even then she made no great headway with him. He was strongly attached to her, he had far more confidence in her than he had in any other woman, and he did not mind listening to her homilies, the

drift of which was more apparent to him than she meant it to be; but he was by nature so reserved, and circumstances had so developed his inborn reticence, that his past remained obscure to her and his future a matter of pure speculation. What seemed evident was that he would do nothing in a hurry. He might or he might not eventually go in for a political career; he might or he might not essay a second matrimonial venture; for the time being, the only subject which he could be induced to discuss with some appearance of real interest was that of his daughter's education.

"I'll find some trustworthy, experienced, elderly woman for you," Lady Wardlaw promised. "Of course you couldn't have a resident governess who wasn't elderly."

But James, it appeared, was in no hurry about that either. "All in good time," he said. "For the present, I don't see why I shouldn't continue to act as governess myself."

"But, my dear James, that is impracticable. It stands to reason that you won't be able to find the time, even if there were no other objections. Besides, you can't have the child with you all day long, and I don't—if you'll excuse my saying so—very much fancy that maid, Budgett. Too vulgar and too cheeky to be a good companion for Cuckoo, I should say."

"Yes, perhaps; but I doubt whether she is doing much harm, and her reign can't, in the nature of things, be a long one. Meanwhile, do allow us to have our summer holiday. Everybody is entitled to

summer holidays, you know—including my heir presumptive, who is coming here in a few days with his mother. By the way, what sort of a woman is poor Arthur's widow? It is years since I saw her last, and the only thing I remember about her is that she had a rather red face."

"It hasn't grown any paler," answered Lady Wardlaw; "she doesn't give it a chance. Hunts regularly three days a week during the season, I believe, and spends most of her time out of doors all the year round. You won't like her, though she is a good fellow in her way. Did she ask herself here, or did you ask her?"

"Oh, I asked her. The boy may as well make acquaintance with his future dominions. Added to which, her coming supplies me with an excuse for imploring you to stay a little longer. You won't, I am sure, have the heart to throw the whole burden of entertaining my sporting sister-in-law upon me."

"That will have to depend upon the length of her visit," answered Lady Wardlaw. "I'll see you through a part of it, but there are some engagements which I am afraid we must keep before we go to Scotland, where I hope you will join us later. You used to be a pretty shot once upon a time. Have your eye and hand forgotten their cunning?"

"I don't know; I haven't raised a gun to my shoulder for Heaven knows how long. But I couldn't, anyhow, join house parties or shooting parties this year," said James, with a downward glance at his sable clothing.

"Not large ones, perhaps, but we wouldn't ask you to meet more than half a dozen people. Why, by the way, do you speak of Abbotswell as being Fitzroy's future dominion? I hope Harriet has too much common sense to put such ideas as that into the boy's head, because, really, you know——"

"I am not aware that she has said anything to him upon the subject," answered James; "but she might do so without risking the loss of her reputation for common sense."

Lady Wardlaw shrugged her shoulders and grunted, but did not deem it advisable to argue the point. She thought, however, that it might be just as well to address a word in season to Mrs. Arthur Pennant, whose view of James's duties must naturally differ from her own, and who might possibly endeavour to extort something in the nature of rash promises from him.

But she was relieved to find, almost immediately after the arrival of the heir presumptive and his mother, that the latter was under no foolish illusions as to future events. Mrs. Arthur Pennant was a good-humoured, loud-voiced lady, whose red-brown complexion bore out the description given of her habitual pursuits, and whose costume was modelled upon masculine patterns.

"Oh, that's a foregone conclusion," said she, when she had been refreshed with a cup of tea and had been led out on to the terrace in front of the house by Lady Wardlaw. "I'm free to confess that if James were as inconsolable as he looks I shouldn't be very sorry, and I don't deny that his wife's death

was more of a blow to me than it can have been to him. Old Mr. Pennant used to declare that he was certain she would live to any age, and in those days one had one's modest hopes. But one must take things as they come. I wouldn't give twopence for Fitz's chance of ever inheriting this property now; luckily, he's too young to be disappointed. But I'll tell you what," she added, with a laugh, "supposing, by a miracle, James should either decide to remain single or fail to beget an heir before my boy grows up, I'll get Fitz to marry that little girl of his. Under the circumstances, I should feel that that was the least we could do."

"He gives me to understand that his intention is to remain single," remarked Lady Wardlaw.

"That can't really be his intention, and if it were, you would never let him stick to it," returned the other, laughing again. "All the same, I'm prepared, as I say, to make him a sporting offer. The young ones have chummed up already, you see."

She pointed to the park, across which two juvenile figures could be discerned hastening—Fitzroy, a tall, broad-shouldered boy of fourteen, just home from Eton for the holidays, and Cuckoo, taking two steps to his one, with her head thrown back to enable her to keep her eyes fixed upon the face above her. They appeared to be deep in conversation.

In reality, however, almost all the talking was being done by one of them; the other, despite his manifest superiority of age, sex, and stature, was being catechised after a somewhat condescending fashion, and so taken aback was he by the audacity of

the pigmy who trotted at his side that he had as yet been unable to administer any of the crushing snubs for which her conduct seemed to call. Nor until his small companion had elicited nearly the whole of the information that she desired from him did he recover self-possession enough to gasp out a remonstrance:

"I say, look here! little girls like you shouldn't ask such a lot of questions."

"Why not?" Cuckoo blandly inquired.

This rather disconcerted her admonisher, who did not want to be rude, but was at the same time conscious of what he owed to himself and his dignity. "You're only a girl, you see," he explained at length, "and a very young one into the bargain."

"Budgie says that girls are always much older than boys," observed Cuckoo. She added in French —a language in which she was quite as much at home as in her own—"*Je suis très-avancée pour mon âge.*" And while Fitzroy, to whom all foreign tongues were unknown, was still staring at her, open-mouthed, she proceeded to account for the inquisitiveness to which he had taken exception. "If I hadn't asked you, you wouldn't have told me anything. Now I know that you were fourteen last birthday, and that you have been at Eton a year, and that you have been swished once, and that swishing means whipping, and that you have two sisters, and that you don't know whether they are pretty or not, but you think not, and—and—oh, ever so much more!" She drew a long breath, and concluded by declaring emphatically, "I love you!"

It has to be recorded with regret that Mr. Fitzroy Pennant's rejoinder to an announcement which should have been found flattering by anybody was "Get out!"

"Don't you love me?" inquired Cuckoo, with an air of innocent wonder.

"Of course not. I don't know you yet. What a rum un you are!" replied the youthful and truthful Anglo-Saxon whom she addressed. But, fearing lest she should be unduly cast down, he went on to say: "I like you well enough, as far as we have got, only you mustn't be in such a hurry, you know."

"Well, you are going to love me," the unabashed Cuckoo resumed. "Budgie says I can make anybody love me. She does, and so does father, and so does Sam, the head gardener's boy, and so does Sir William Wardlaw. Did you ever see Sir William Wardlaw? I'll show him to you."

She poked her head forward, in imitation of Sir William's habitual sidelong stoop, put her hands behind her back, and, with a ludicrously exact reproduction of his voice, drawled out: "My dear Jane, that child is a marvel! If your life depended upon it, you couldn't tell me whether the fourth note of this passage is G sharp or A flat, but she can."

The boy broke out into a loud, abrupt laugh. "By Jove!" he exclaimed admiringly.

Cuckoo's subjugation of her cousin may perhaps be dated from that moment. It was, at all events, at that moment that he formed the conviction, to which he ever afterward remained faithful, of her

being "awfully clever"; and since he had every reason to believe that he himself was awfully stupid, he found therein the excuse which self-respect demanded for a more or less complete surrender of his views and opinions to hers.

He was not, as a matter of fact, awfully stupid, only rather slow. For the rest, he adequately and satisfactorily represented the average well-born English boy, the traditional good looks of the Pennant family being supplemented in his case by the fine physique which he had inherited from his mother's side. That Cuckoo and he should become, as they did, firm friends was, moreover, quite in accordance with the wishes of their elders, who smiled upon their alliance. Only Fitzroy privately begged Cuckoo not to talk any more about loving him. He said that was putting things much too strongly, and exposed you to the risk of being laughed at and chaffed by those who might chance to overhear your words. There would be no objection to her calling him a jolly good fellow, or something of that sort, if she thought him deserving of such compliments.

After a day or two, Sir William Wardlaw announced that he must reluctantly bring his visit to a close. "Fare thee well, faithless girl!" said he, with a wave of his hand toward Cuckoo. "Youth and beauty, in the person of Fitzroy—upon whose cheeks I am glad to notice the blush of compunction mantling—have cut me out, and you decline to keep company with me any longer. I shall seek consolation and oblivion on the moors."

So the Wardlaws departed, and James was left

to the society of Mrs. Arthur Pennant, whom, upon more familiar acquaintance, he found that he liked pretty well. He had not much in common with the bluff, plain-spoken woman, yet her honesty gave her a certain claim upon his regard, and the unsolicited advice with which she favoured him was so far welcomed that it chanced to lend support to his own inclinations.

"Stave off the governess as long as you can," said she; "I would, if I were you. Governesses are always a bore, and sometimes they play the very deuce. What I should recommend, for the present, in the way of lessons, would be occasional instruction from the curate, who will answer your purpose quite well and will be glad enough to turn an honest penny. Future arrangements may be left to the unavoidable stepmother—oh, don't say she isn't unavoidable; I know better. Meanwhile, if you can make a sportswoman of the child, you won't have done badly for her. My two girls, I am thankful to say, know as much about sport as their brother does, and that means something, I can tell you."

She had to return to her two girls presently, but Fitzroy, at the earnest entreaty of his entertainers, backed by his own expressed wish, was allowed to remain another week at Abbotswell. James had purchased a couple of ponies, upon the smaller and quieter of which Cuckoo fearlessly perched herself every morning, and she was taught to ride with the ease and rapidity which then and thereafter characterized all her efforts to learn anything that she wanted to learn. Her father, who, without any pre-

tensions to be a finished horseman, could stick to his saddle as well as another, once or twice mounted one of the carriage horses and superintended the process of education which Fitzroy had been so kind as to undertake; but as a rule he left the children to themselves. James Pennant was well aware—and though he would gladly have had it otherwise, he could not help it—that only a very few of his fellow-creatures were ever quite at their ease in his presence.

It was a pity that he was so formidable. Long afterward, when he had become a noted personage in public life, Lady Wardlaw used to declare that he had made himself impossible as leader of the House of Commons simply and solely by reason of his inability to let people down easy. But he was what he was, and thus poor Cuckoo got into sad trouble for excitedly informing him one day at luncheon that she had jumped her pony across a stream almost as broad as the room.

"That," observed the recipient of this startling statement quietly, "is impossible."

And the said stream having, on application to the veracious Fitzroy, been reduced to the dimensions of a very small ditch, some stern, severe words were spoken which caused the ears of the hapless boaster to tingle. Also she was forbidden, by way of necessary punishment, to take her pony out of the stable again for three whole days—a rather heavy sentence, considering what it implied. For on the third day Fitzroy was to go away, and whether he would ever come back again, who could tell? The boy—not

without a secret trepidation—subsequently took his courage in both hands, and, on being admitted into Mr. Pennam's study, pleaded for a partial remission.

"She's awfully sorry," he said, "and she didn't really mean it, you know. It's only a way of talking that she has."

"She must be cured of that way of talking," was James's inexorable reply. "I could not hope or expect to cure her if I myself were to say one thing and mean another."

So there were no more rides, Fitzroy stolidly refusing an unaccompanied gallop on the steed provided for him; but he assured Cuckoo that he would certainly return during the Christmas holidays, if he was asked—and indeed why had two ponies been bought unless a second invitation was in store for him?

But Cuckoo shook her head mournfully and prophesied that he would forget her when he went back to Eton. "You love—well, then, you *like* boys much more than girls, Fitz; you know you do!"

Fitzroy replied that there were exceptions to every rule. He likewise favoured her with the consolatory assertion that she, individually, was not a bit like girls in general.

"Father doesn't want me to be, and I don't want to be," said Cuckoo, with a rather wistful sigh; "but I expect it isn't any good."

"What isn't any good?" asked Fitzroy, staring.

The girl made no answer. Garrulous though she was, she had many thoughts which she kept to herself, and her perceptions of immutable facts were

keener, it may be, than those of a boy, or even of so dolefully experienced a man as James Pennant. "It's easy for you to tell the truth," she remarked presently; "that's because you aren't a girl."

"No, it isn't," Fitzroy stoutly returned, "it's because I'm a duffer and I haven't got any imagination. You're so brimful of it that you couldn't call a ditch a ditch if you tried. Bless your soul! *I* understand that you didn't mean to tell any lie."

From which it may be inferred that the young gentleman was not, after all, quite so dull as he modestly supposed himself.

Nevertheless, he was scarcely prepared for the extravagant gratitude with which his speech was received; nor, when the sad moment for leave-taking arrived, could he approve of the demonstrations in which Cuckoo saw fit to indulge. She led him into a secluded corner of the garden—"to say good-bye all by ourselves," she explained—and before he could defend himself suddenly kissed him on both cheeks.

"There!" she cried; "I know you hated it, but I had to do it. I suppose you wouldn't, just for this once, say 'I love you'?"

"It's such rot, you know!" remonstrated the roseate Fitzroy.

"But nobody would hear you except me, and I'll never tell," pleaded the precocious representative of the emotional sex.

"Well, then," returned the boy, after a moment of hesitation, "I love you, Cuckoo. Now I hope you're satisfied!"

CHAPTER IV.

TRIBULATION.

It was all very fine for Cuckoo to boast that she was not afraid of her father; but she was, as a fact, deeply in awe of that quiet, silent master, who gave her the impression of doing what he believed to be right simply because it had to be done, and without either liking or disliking his unavoidable duty. Such persons are often said to be born rulers of men, and indeed they have proved themselves so upon more than one occasion; but it may perhaps be doubted whether they are qualified to become rulers of women. James, however, was so far successful with Cuckoo that, after the taste of adversity recorded in the last chapter, she took a great deal of trouble to keep within the limits of strict accuracy in relating her small adventures. Some of these she judged it prudent—lest she should fall into temptation—to avoid relating altogether, and this was a little unfortunate, for James always knew when she was keeping something back from him, and was always hurt by the withholding of confidences which he did not choose to solicit.

Nevertheless, this odd couple, when they were left to themselves, remained friends, if not quite as

close friends as they had been on the shores of the Lago Maggiore. Lessons were resumed, and the assistance of little Mr. Andrews, the curate, was, as Mrs. Arthur Pennant had recommended, provisionally called in. Nothing was easier than to gain the upper hand of the curate of the parish, who was an amiable young gentleman, fresh from Cambridge, addicted to cricket, devoid alike of capacity for imparting knowledge and of desire to establish authority over his pupil; so Cuckoo got on quite nicely with him, and he gave the reports of her proficiency which she wished him to give. During play hours her father frequently took her out riding, and did his best to replace the absent and mourned Fitzroy. But he was painfully conscious of not having it in him to replace anybody—least of all, perhaps, the indulgent and injudicious mother of whom neither he nor the child ever spoke. What, according to his notions, could be done, he did, with results which, so far as they went, were salutary enough. Twice a week a retired drill sergeant came over from Devizes to put Cuckoo through a course of gymnastics and athletic exercises, and likewise, with James's full approval, to instruct her in the noble art of self-defence.

"You are going to be a woman," he would sometimes say, "but that is no reason why you should not be taught to use your limbs as men use them, and learn some of the lessons which every man has to learn."

One of these, as we know, was to tell the truth; another was to face danger fearlessly; a third was

to bear hard knocks, if they chanced to come, without crying out. So when Cuckoo's pony put his foot into a rabbit hole one day, and sent her flying into space, with a consequent black eye and a rather severe shaking, she had to apply for sympathy to Budgett, who responded to the appeal in no grudging spirit. Her father merely remarked that one must expect to get an occasional fall, and that experiences of that sort had the good effect of teaching careless equestrians to mind what they were about. So the weeks and months passed on, with little in the way of incident to break their monotony, and autumn turned the woods yellow, and the question of engaging a governess was suffered to remain still in abeyance. Upon the whole, Cuckoo had a pleasant time of it and was tolerably happy; her inevitable solitude being to some extent relieved by long confabulations and rambles with Sam, the gardener's boy. James, too, began to find himself shaking down into his place as a country squire. He was placed on the Commission of the Peace; he saw something, though not very much, of his neighbours; he proved himself a very fair shot; something like a definite programme of future existence began to shape itself out for him. Why, when the hunting season opened, he saw fit to follow the hounds was not very apparent, for he did not really care much about the sport, and he was far from practising what he preached with regard to careful riding. The M. F. H. declared that it positively made his blood run cold to watch Mr. Pennant's uncalled-for performances; the man, according to him, had nei-

ther seat, hands, nor judgment, while anybody could see that the animals which he bestrode were too many guns for so reckless and ignorant a horseman.

However, if it amused him to risk his neck, that was his affair; what everybody was agreed that he had no earthly business to do was to bring a mere baby, mounted on a fat pony, out with him and expect her to follow where he led. As a rule, of course, the pony did not and could not follow, so that Mr. Pennant was balked of more than one run, a disappointment which he bore imperturbably. But, since he was determined that the child should learn not to shirk difficulties, and since Cuckoo was too much afraid of being afraid to disobey his injunctions, a day came when the accident which he ought to have foreseen occurred. It looked like a rather nasty accident, too. The fence, to be sure, was an insignificant one and might easily have been cleared but for the invisible ditch beyond it; but into that ditch the pony dropped his fore legs, and his rider, who did not understand how to fall clear of him, was for some moments in imminent danger of terminating her hunting career there and then. She was insensible when they carried her into a neighbouring farmhouse, where the local practitioner, who happened, luckily, to form one of the field, was soon in attendance. He could not, he said, at once ascertain the extent of her injuries, but these subsequently proved to amount to nothing more serious than a couple of broken ribs and an ugly gash below the knee, where she had been kicked.

"A couple of inches higher," the doctor re-

marked on the following day, by which time James had been relieved of his worst fears, "and she would have been lame for life, in all probability. Even as it is, Mr. Pennant, I shouldn't be at all surprised if you had ruined her nerve. It's no business of mine, of course, but, being a bit of a hunting man myself, I can't help saying that your method of teaching a small child to ride to hounds is opposed to every principle of common sense."

James accepted the rebuke meekly, promising to profit by it. He had in truth had a terrible fright, and what augmented alike his self-reproach and his thankfulness was the pluck with which Cuckoo endured a good deal of pain and discomfort. He spent nearly the whole day in the child's room while she was confined to bed, reading fairy tales aloud to her, playing games of draughts with her (which his conscience, under the exceptional circumstances, permitted him to lose), and tending her with a deft gentleness of touch unattainable by the jealous Budgett, whose displeasure found vent in subdued snorts and mutterings. If Cuckoo was a little proud of herself and a trifle over-exultant in her assertions that she had not been in the least frightened and would ride at the same place a second time as soon as ever she should be fit to get into the saddle once more, who could blame her?

"I'm *not* a coward, am I, father?" she triumphantly asked.

And James could only reply: "No, my dear, you have shown that you are not. But I, unfortunately, have shown that I am a stupid ignoramus,

and when you resume hunting I must try to find some more capable pilot for you."

The child's hot little hand was instantly stretched out to grasp his. "I'd rather go with you, father, if you'll take me," she said.

So, for the time being at all events, those two came very near to understanding one another, and the period of convalescence which followed—brief, as the convalescence of healthy children always is—was one upon which they both afterward liked to look back. But they were too radically unlike, alas! to arrive at that permanent mutual comprehension which is so seldom reached by differing natures until events and lapse of time have rendered it of small avail. Insensibly, and without any ostensible reason for it, they began to drift apart again after Cuckoo was running about as usual; they had little unconscious ways of hurting one another's feelings, the accumulation of which was only too effectual. Cuckoo could not dispense with being petted, and her father ceased to be demonstrative as soon as she was restored to health. James, on his side, noticed that the child had trivial secrets and concealments from him, and he was sore at his failure to secure her confidence.

The Arthur Pennants were to have come *en masse* to spend Christmas, but at the last moment one of Mrs. Arthur's little girls defeated this project by developing measles, which was a sad disappointment to the expectant Cuckoo.

"Couldn't Fitz come without the others?" she asked, with tears in her eyes.

But James did not think it would be prudent to run the risk of infection, so she submitted, sighing deeply, to cruel Fate's decree.

James apologized. "I would ask the boy if I could," he said. "I know how dreary it must be for you to have no young companions—only an old fogy like me in the house."

Cuckoo did not contradict him, but it was never her way to brood or sulk. "I shall have to make the best of Sam," was her smiling and philosophical rejoinder.

Now the best that could be made of Sam was, unhappily, nothing very good; for he was an idle, mischievous young rascal, with whom Cuckoo would never have been allowed to associate as constantly and familiarly as she did, had all been known about him that might have been known. It is true that Mr. Andrews, who did know something, thought it his duty to address a mild remonstrance upon the subject to Mr. Pennant; but this was not very well received. James disliked talebearers, and courteously, but rather coldly, gave his informer to understand as much. Cuckoo, therefore, was suffered to prosecute, unmolested, her intimacy with this social inferior, and although his ethical standard was scarcely of a nature to command her respect, she found him, as she said, "very amusing," a quality which always, in her eyes, covered a multitude of defects.

Sam was addicted to smoking on the sly, not so much because he liked it as because his father had strictly forbidden indulgence in the habit. It was

courageous of him to defy the paternal prohibition, seeing that a short clay pipe, filled with shag, never failed to make him disastrously sick, and it may have been—let us charitably hope that it was—a desire to spare him and herself such frequent discomfort that led Cuckoo into the commission of an act of petty larceny. It was easy enough to abstract a cigarette from the silver box which stood on Mr. Pennant's writing table; he was not likely to miss it, and indeed did not miss it. But that mild Egyptian tobacco of James's was the very thing to suit an adolescent smoker, and Sam, who was a broad-chested boy, with fine, powerful lungs, could get through half a dozen of these in no time, after which he would ask for more. Thus it became a serious question with Cuckoo whether she could continue to supply an increasing demand without laying herself open to retribution here and hereafter.

"It's stealing, you know, Sam," she ended by objecting; "you can't call it anything else."

"Lor' bless 'ee, nobody don't call *that* stealin'," her confederate returned. "Stealin' means priggin' of money and jools and such like. Why, just look at father!" And here Mr. Samuel proceeded to enter into details respecting the sale of fruit and vegetables, which enlightened his hearer as to the accepted signification of the word perquisite.

"It is all very wrong," said Cuckoo virtuously, "and if you want any more cigarettes, you must go and get them yourself. I won't tell, but I won't take them for you again after this."

Yet she was prevailed upon to resume her nefari-

ous practices, influenced partly by Sam's threat of deserting so chicken-hearted a pal, partly, it is to be feared, by his representations that "nobody wouldn't be none the wiser."

It is quite possible that the crime might have remained unsuspected had that young villain's acquired appetite for tobacco been less immoderate; the disappearance of six cigarettes *per diem* may very well escape the notice of an absent-minded man, but when it comes to a dozen or more, suspicion is apt to be aroused, and thus James ended by feeling it incumbent upon him to speak rather sharply to the butler.

"Barker, somebody is helping himself every day to my cigarettes. I accuse no one, having no evidence to go upon, but I can not keep everything under lock and key, and I must hold you responsible for this systematic robbery unless you can check it."

Now Barker, as it happened, was a total abstainer from spirituous liquors and tobacco, so that his withers were unwrung. But of course he was not going to lose his place in order to screen Thomas, the footman, who, on being interrogated, did enter a plea of not guilty, but was so incoherent and indignant (his conscience perhaps not being wholly void of offence) that when he went on to give a month's notice he was not pressed to reconsider the point.

A most unhappy and sorely perplexed culprit was Cuckoo on receiving the news that Thomas was about to leave under a cloud—a cloud, alas! of Sam's blowing and her procuring. What was to be

done? The choice, at first sight, seemed to lie between treachery to an accomplice and the sacrifice of an innocent victim—a pair of gruesome alternatives. But reflection suggested a third course, which the delinquent made haste to adopt, lest further reflection should deprive her of the heroism that it exacted.

"Budgie," Cuckoo tragically announced, flinging herself on a sudden into the arms of the only person whom she felt able to face, "I am going to hell!"

"Oh, you unladylike child!" exclaimed the shocked Budgett; "this comes of keeping low company, which I have said all along your papa didn't ought to let you run about wild with that impudent gardener's boy. What ever can you be thinking about to say such things!"

"I say them because they are true," answered Cuckoo dolorously. "If you break the ten commandments you go to hell, and that's what I've been doing. Thomas mustn't be sent away. It was I who took father's cigarettes. Yes, and I smoked them all myself—I did indeed—and liked them!"

"Well, I never!" gasped Budgett. "So that's why your frocks has been smelling so horrid! Well, I shall have to tell your papa, that's certain, and you had better make up your mind to it."

"I want you to tell him," poor Cuckoo said. "I would tell him myself, only—only, I'm afraid!"

Not without a pang did she stoop to that mortifying avowal. She felt, however, that the cup of humiliation must be drained to its dregs, and that,

contemptible as she might appear, she was in reality even more so than she had painted herself. Budgett triumphed no more than was natural, merely remarking:

"I'm sure I don't wonder! I'll say all I can for you—not being afraid of him myself, nor any reason to be—but punishment is what you must look for. I couldn't advise him to let such behaviour pass without punishment—I couldn't really!"

The idea of Budgett offering sage advice to one who would assuredly not give her the chance of taking so great a liberty would have made Cuckoo laugh if she had been still capable of laughter. As it was, she limited herself to remarking sorrowfully, "It won't make any difference what you say."

What Budgett actually did say never transpired, but it may safely be assumed that she was not permitted to wander very far from the point. That she had interceded for Cuckoo she declared on her return from the audience which she had requested.

"Though what he means to do with you, my dear, I really can't tell," she was fain to confess. "He's that stiff and haughty there's no saying whether he's pleased or displeased."

He certainly was not pleased, as Cuckoo discovered, when she tremblingly entered the study whither she had been summoned, and he did not disguise from her that, had she been a boy, he would probably have thought it his duty to give her a sound whipping. On the other hand, he was ready to allow her such credit as was due to her voluntary admission of guilt. Her guilt, she must understand,

consisted in the painful fact that she had been a thief. Smoking was not in itself a criminal offence, although it was, in James's opinion, a most undesirable habit for ladies to contract, and quite inadmissible in the case of young children. She would have to give him her word of honour that she would never do such a thing again. For the rest, both she and her father must beg Thomas's pardon, and the household would be informed of how she had disgraced herself. There was to be no other punishment, it seemed, except that for a fortnight to come she would be sent to bed an hour earlier than usual.

Upon the whole, therefore, she might feel, and did feel, that she had been let off upon tolerably easy terms. The melancholy part of it was that, although her breach of the ninth commandment had been confessed and condoned, she remained splendidly mendacious, and, since one may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, she proceeded to add to the sum of her mendacity by some amazing imaginative flights. Averse though he was to asking questions, James could not help expressing some curiosity as to the origin of the strange taste which she professed to have acquired. "I should have thought you would have made yourself sick," he remarked. Whereupon Cuckoo, perceiving at once that her story, as it stood, lacked verisimilitude, hastened to describe graphically and in full detail the sensations of nausea from which she had not suffered. Temptation, she averred, had assailed her at first in the form of a desire to do what her father did; afterward, triumphing over preliminary incon-

veniences, she had began to find the effects of tobacco soothing and its flavour agreeable; finally, it had become almost a necessity to her. But never again! She had been too miserable all the time to derive any real satisfaction from the gratification of her senses, and now that she had given her word of honour, there was an end to it. All this was poured forth so glibly and with an air of such innocent candour that the most sceptical of men might well have been deceived. James, at all events, was free from the faintest shadow of suspicion; once or twice he even laughed.

At a later hour of the day Cuckoo went out into the garden in search of Sam, whom, when she had discovered him, she sorrowfully but firmly informed that all was over between them. "Perhaps it isn't altogether your fault," her sense of justice impelled her to add, "but I can't bear the sight of you now. So I couldn't play with you any more, you see, even if I wanted to."

Sam was a good deal annoyed. He had liked those cigarettes, and he had also liked his playmate, whose action in denouncing herself struck him as both foolish and uncalled-for. He told her as much in the simple and direct language which was habitual to him, and inquired reproachfully why the blazes she couldn't have kept her mouth shut.

"You don't understand," answered Cuckoo, with mournful and compassionate dignity; "you are a very common boy. I hope, after this, you will not speak to me again unless you are spoken to. Fitz would have understood. Good evening."

She then betook herself to a certain disused arbour in a remote corner of the grounds and, curling herself up on the worm-eaten bench within it, wept bitterly. If there had hitherto been any doubt as to her destination beyond the grave, there could be none now. Her dreadful fate was to bear for the rest of her days the burden of a lie of which she might indeed repent, but could never disclose. For, however common, vulgar, disappointing, and dishonest Sam might be, she had no thought of betraying him.

CHAPTER V.

AN ADMITTED FAILURE.

The daughter of Danaus may have deserved to be called splendidly mendacious and noble for all time, but the daughter of James Pennant was quite unable to flatter herself that she had earned any such distinction by her magnanimous screening of a rather mean accomplice. We are so constituted—or, at all events, the heroine of this narrative was so constituted—that the pleasure which arises out of the perpetration of a really brilliant and artistic lie is apt to turn sour from the moment that that lie is loyally accepted, and for the next ten days or so Cuckoo lived in a sort of earthly purgatory. On the one hand, her father's kindness (for it was evident that he respected her for having confessed what he believed to be the truth, and would fain have remitted the punishment which he had felt bound to inflict) was well-nigh unendurable; on the other, it was out of the question to betray Sam. There was, to be sure, just a chance of Sam's being brought to recognise the course imposed upon him by honour and honesty, and she overcame her repugnance for that juvenile delinquent so far as to address him upon the subject one day. But Sam sullenly and un-

hesitatingly replied that he would see her jolly well blowed first, and *then* he wouldn't!

"What! go and give myself away like that when there ain't not the shadder of proof agin' me? Not me! You'd better blab yourself, if you're pore-spirited enough for to do sech a thing. But I'll bet he don't believe you, and *I* shan't admit nothin', you may take yer oath o' that!"

Cuckoo sighed heavily and said no more. Older persons than she have not unfrequently found themselves in a dilemma similar to hers, and we have the reports of numerous *causes célèbres* to inform us how older persons almost invariably conceive it their duty to act when thus disagreeably situated; but Cuckoo's uneducated conscience was as yet proof against the anodynes of casuistry. It came to pass, therefore, that when her period of enforced early retirement to bed had expired, and when she was seated at dessert one evening with the dread master of the house, who was only too glad to have her back with him once more at that hour, she suddenly burst forth, in a voice which the beating of her heart rendered loud, uncertain, and spasmodic:

"Father, I want to tell you something, but I can't tell you unless you make me a promise first."

James shook his head. He was afraid he could not undertake to make any promises in the dark.

"But *please!*" entreated Cuckoo, laying her hot little hand for an instant upon his. Her hand was hot, though her cheeks were white and her eyes unnaturally large. "It's—it's about a—a servant,"

she went on. "I want you to know, but the servant mustn't be punished, or else I can't tell you."

James smiled. "My dear child," he answered quite kindly, "I think perhaps you had better not tell me. Servants are apt to do things for which one may have to punish them if they are found out; but I don't particularly wish to hear of what I can't discover for myself. And as for promising in advance to let a culprit off scot-free, that is impossible."

Cuckoo buried her face in her hands, dropped her head upon the table, and sobbed aloud. Her father, she knew by experience, meant what he said and said what he meant; since he had called it impossible to comply with her conditions, impossible it must be, and there was no hope for her.

Presently an arm was placed round her neck, and a tender, womanly voice, which at first she hardly recognised, was saying close to her ear: "Don't cry so, my darling; if you have anything on your mind, tell me what it is and then you will feel ever so much better. You mustn't be frightened of me."

But Cuckoo shrank away. "Oh, don't, father!" she gasped. "You wouldn't, if you knew! You can't think what a—what a beast I am! Oh, if you would only promise!" she concluded despairingly.

"That woman Budgett has been playing some pranks or other, I suppose," thought James, as he returned to his chair. "Well, it's a bad precedent, but I can't allow the child to fret herself into an illness." Aloud, he said: "All right, little woman; for

this once—but only this once, mind—I'll promise to forgive the servant. Now let us hear all about it. I dare say it is nothing so very terrible, after all."

Yet when he had heard all about it he did think it rather terrible, and was obliged to own that he did. Not, of course, the bare facts that Cuckoo's taste for Egyptian tobacco was vicarious, and that she had accused herself in order to shield another; these in themselves were neither unsatisfactory nor discreditable. But what took a man's breath away and caused his heart to sink was the revelation of such an amazing talent for duplicity on the part of one so young.

"How did you manage—who can ever have taught you—to lie like that?" he ejaculated in dismay.

Cuckoo replied by a despondent gesture. She did not know; she supposed that the devil must have been her instructor. For the rest, she was ready to bear uncomplainingly the castigation which she had earned. "I don't mind being flayed alive!" she declared, incorrigibly exaggerative still, notwithstanding her unfeigned remorse and repentance.

What is likely enough is that she would have preferred any reasonable form of physical punishment to her father's blank distress and ultimate admission that he had no idea what to do with her. That seemed to make her very bad, indeed—so bad that it became almost a question whether she would not have done better to drown herself in the lake or hang herself upon one of the apple trees in the orchard than to bring, by the confession which she had

made, eternal disgrace upon the family name and honour. James gave her to understand that no ordinary punishment could meet the requirements of the case.

"It isn't a thing to be angry or to scold about," he said; "it's a disease which must be fought against, and, I hope, conquered. But whether I have it in my power to lay my hand upon the remedies that are wanted seems to me very doubtful. I thought I had done and said my utmost."

He probably had, and his failure was beyond question. After a fashion Cuckoo understood him, but he did not at all understand her, nor did he give her any encouragement to explain herself. The display of love and sympathy to which he had been moved by her tears had passed away, leaving him cold, perplexed, regretfully compassionate, hopelessly unapproachable. Presently he dismissed the child, remarking that it was time for her to go to bed, assuring her that she might rely upon his word with regard to Sam, and recommending her to add a special petition to her evening prayers upon the subject of her besetting sin. He had never been what is commonly called a pious man, but he believed, amongst other things, in the efficacy of prayer, and since the death of his wife (who had believed in remarkably little) Cuckoo's religious education and practices had not been neglected.

Budgett, on being informed by her awe-struck charge of what had occurred, proved refreshingly human. She was as horrified, as abusive, as eager for severe pains and penalties as could be wished,

and so certain was she that these latter would in due course be inflicted, that Cuckoo ended, after all, by sobbing herself to sleep quite comfortably.

James, on the other hand, had a bad night. All his life long there had been certain offences which he had found it exceedingly difficult to forgive, and with which he had no notion of how to deal. He would rather that Cuckoo had been anything than a liar—possibly even a congenital liar!—and he perceived that homilies upon the infamy of lying were not likely to turn out efficacious. She had, to be sure, made a clean breast of her guilt; but what security had he against a repetition of it? His conclusion—a conclusion to which he had been forced on many previous occasions—was the mortifying one that he was unfit for the task which he had taken in hand. Thus, although he was surprised at the suggestion coming from that quarter, he did not cry out against it when, on the following morning, Cuckoo diffidently said:

"Father, don't you think I had better be sent to school?"

"Yes, if there were public schools for girls I should say so," he replied. "You would learn something there which I am afraid I can't teach you."

"It might make me different," observed Cuckoo dejectedly.

James nodded. "I suppose it is to a great extent a question of discipline and surroundings," he said. "Unfortunately, the sort of training that is wanted is not, so far as I know, to be obtained at seminaries for young ladies."

He spoke to her in a detached, dispassionate style, as though she were some baffling species of malady; he did not even hint at chastisement, nor had he a word of blame or praise or pity for her. So the child, who was conscious of having made a heroic proposal (for the idea of going to school happened to be particularly repugnant to her), left his presence chilled and discouraged.

Mr. Andrews, on being consulted, gave it as his opinion that from the educational point of view schools must be considered preferable to private tuition. He had found his pupil exceptionally bright and intelligent, but he could not say that she had shown much disposition to apply herself systematically to study. No doubt she stood in need of the stimulus of emulation which we all more or less require, and which is incompatible with solitude. As for moral influences—ah, well, that of course was a very difficult question. It was said that there were girls' schools which were very far from being satisfactory in that respect; but then, again, he had heard others spoken of in the highest terms. It seemed a pity, he quite agreed, that girls could not be brought up with the ideas which it was easy enough to thrash into their brothers; still, since they were not boys—well, one could only assume that Providence had created them for other purposes and with other idiosyncrasies, you know.

Evidently not much practical help was to be looked for from this reverend counsellor; so James gave orders for his portmanteau to be packed, and went up to London to see Lady Wardlaw, who, when

all was said, had a clear and sensible head upon her shoulders. And her ladyship, by whom he was warmly welcomed, responded to his query without a moment's hesitation.

"By all means send the child to school; much the best thing you can do! I should have taken the liberty of recommending it in the first instance, only I knew you wouldn't listen to me. I haven't forgotten you; I have been making inquiries about governesses; but there are objections to every single one that I have heard of up to now. A young woman would be suing you for breach of promise before you knew where you were, and the others seem to be either old sillies, who would be ridden over rough shod by their pupil, or termagants, who would probably insist upon taking the head of the table when you had people staying with you."

James sighed. "Besides, I doubt whether, in any case, a governess would answer my purpose," he observed. "I might perhaps accomplish it for myself if I had the indispensable knack, but I see now that I haven't."

"Already? What has the young lady been doing to bring that wholesome conviction home to you?"

James was rather disinclined to tell. Fond as he was of Jane Wardlaw, he had an impression—a mistaken one, as it happened—that she was not particularly fond of children, and he suspected that she would make scant allowance for delinquencies of which she herself, with her natural straightforward character, was probably incapable.

"One soon finds out what one can do and what

one can't," he answered evasively. "The number of things which I can't do is so large that the discovery of an addition to them scarcely astonishes me."

"You will be agreeably astonished, my dear James," returned Lady Wardlaw, "when you begin, just by way of a change, to try doing possible things."

Amongst other possibilities, that of a distinguished political career was, according to her, well within his reach, and she required no encouragement to dilate upon that subject. At other possibilities, which seemed to her equally attainable and not less desirable, she hinted with discreet ambiguity, and James let her talk, glad enough to be spared further discussion of a problem which he had travelled up from Wiltshire on purpose to discuss. "I might have known," he thought to himself, "what Jane's point of view would be."

But although he was no longer disposed to consult Lady Wardlaw, and although it was little in accordance with his custom to consult anybody, he felt impelled to ask for one small piece of information from Mrs. Arthur Pennant, whom he encountered in Berkeley Square the next day, she being on her way home from Brighton, whither her convalescent daughter had been sent to recruit.

"Bless your soul, yes!" she promptly said, in answer to James's query; "all children tell fibs sooner or later—tell them uncommonly well, too, as a general rule. They don't think they are going to be found out, you see, which gives them confi-

dence. But they always are found out—at least that has been my experience."

This was precisely what James had hoped to hear from the competent mother of a family.

"And when you find them out, what do you do?" he inquired.

"Smack them," was Mrs. Arthur's succinct and decisive response.

"H'm!—yes. And does that cure them?"

The good-humoured, red-faced woman laughed. "Well," she answered, "it teaches them what they have to expect, anyhow." She added, with a not unkindly glance at James's sombre, perturbed countenance, "You mustn't expect to discover a cure for original sin, you know, and you had better not take things too tragically. If you want my opinion, I agree with Jane. School rather than home. In point of fact, situated as you are, *anything* rather than home. It sounds uncivil to say so, but I don't mean it uncivilly. Circumstances are to blame, not you."

Such advice was really honest and disinterested on Mrs. Arthur Pennant's part, for she could not but be aware that Cuckoo's removal must have the effect of bringing her brother-in-law several strides nearer to that second marriage, which would probably deprive Fitzroy of a substantial estate; but she comforted herself with the thought that, in any case, Jane Wardlaw would have brought about the inevitable some day or other. It was perhaps just as well that matters should be precipitated, and that one should know for certain how one stood. Besides,

she felt a genuine compassion for the poor little girl, who seemed to be in danger of falling a victim to masculine lack of comprehension.

To end up with came a few words of recommendation from Sir William Wardlaw which struck James as having something in them.

"You are in a difficulty about Miss Cuckoo, I hear," Sir William said. "Well, I'm no authority upon the bringing up of the young, but I know what I should do with her if she belonged to me. I should send her to Leipzig."

"Why to Leipzig?" James asked.

"Oh, only because she is musical, and because it seems a pity that she should be taught music in the wrong way. Anyhow, it would be an excuse."

"An excuse for what?"

"For not keeping her at home, which, I imagine, is what is really wanted."

That was certainly not what James would have wanted had he consulted his own inclinations, but he had lost confidence in the wisdom of his own inclinations, while he had never had much in the probable results of English boarding-school methods. "I am evidently no good; it looks as if a governess would be no good, and there are risks connected with school companionship which one doesn't care to run," was what he thought. "The alternative of a compromise remains, and why shouldn't it take the form of Madame Voisin?"

Madame Voisin was a retired pianist, whom he had known for many years, and who had enjoyed a certain celebrity before rheumatic gout and stiffened

finger joints had forced her to quit the lucrative platform. She resided, indeed, in Paris, not in Leipzig, but she had learned all that Germany could teach her in the days when French musical students could still avail themselves of Teutonic instruction. For the rest, she was a most amiable and respectable person, eking out her slender means by receiving occasional boarders, amongst whom Mr. and Mrs. James Pennant had more than once been included during periods of enforced economy, so that there were good grounds for believing that she would not decline the proposal which was despatched to her by that evening's post.

In point of fact, she accepted it with alacrity and with profuse gratitude for the liberal terms offered, and thus Cuckoo was informed of the destiny which awaited her immediately after her father's return to Abbotswell.

"It may not be what you would like best, nor perhaps what I should have chosen for you if I had felt free to choose," he said; "but I don't think you will be unhappy in Paris, and I have arranged for Budgett to go with you. You will attend classes, Madame Voisin will see to your musical education, you will keep up your French, and—and in the holidays I hope we shall have some pleasant times together."

The child received this intimation submissively, being neither elated nor dismayed by it. She understood that she was about to be dismissed from home because her conduct had merited banishment. She was rather glad that she was not going to school,

and very glad that she was not to be separated from Budgett. If she shed some bitter tears in private over the presumed loss of her father's affection, James did not suspect them. Free use of soap is an excellent remedy for red eyelids, and Cuckoo (who was apt to cry upon slight provocation) then and thereafter soaped her eyelids pretty frequently. We must all needs do the same, in a literal or metaphorical sense, unless we wish existence to become far too emotional a business for everyday purposes.

The leave-taking which ensued in Paris a few weeks later between these two rather forlorn and lonely persons was not wholly unmarked by emotional demonstration, although only a few words were exchanged on the occasion. At the last moment, when worthy Madame Voisin had left them in sole occupancy of her stiff little *salon*, Cuckoo felt impelled to say, with a sort of gasp:

"Father, I'm sorry about the cigarettes. You believe I'm sorry, don't you?"

So then James kissed her and answered that they would think no more about that distressing episode. Also he undertook to give her love to Fitzroy, and promised that, if it could be managed, she should see her cousin again during the summer holidays. Presently he went away, with the memory of a hug bestowed upon him by two small, soft arms, and with a pain at his heart which partook a little of the nature of self-reproach.

"Poor Ada would call me a brute if she knew," he sighed; "but I believe, all the same, that it is the right thing to do."

Budgett, exultant at being left in charge and resolved to maintain the dignity of her position against any old Frenchwoman, endeavoured to cheer up the disconsolate Cuckoo.

"Now, my dear, we're going to be comfortable and enjoy ourselves," said she. "As for your papa, it's easy to guess what *he* means to do—and really I can't blame him. Only when he gets his new wife she shall give no orders to you nor me, that you may depend!"

"Budgie," was Cuckoo's thankless reply, "you are a pig!"

And after that unladylike ejaculation she lifted up her voice and wept.

CHAPTER VI.

A PROMISE OF SUCCESS.

Those amongst us who have reached or passed middle age are able to perceive, on casting a backward glance, that our several careers have divided themselves into sections of which the importance in no way corresponds with the length, and (in the event of our having kicked up enough dust during our residence upon the earth's surface for somebody to think a printed record of that process likely to pay expenses) to foresee exactly what periods the skilled biographer will airily dismiss in a paragraph or two. Now, if the present modest work were a Life of the Right Honourable James Pennant, P. C., M. P., the eight years, more or less, which succeeded that journey to Paris, mentioned in the last chapter, would demand full and careful treatment; for of course a man does not rise from the lowest to the highest rungs of the Parliamentary ladder without feats and adventures which explain his upward progress. But since it has a much less famous, and possibly less interesting, personage for its subject, a large skip at this point stands in need of no apology.

It may even be that Cuckoo herself, when she thinks nowadays—with that queer little smile of

hers, half humorous, half pathetic—of the long educational years spent in France, Germany, and Italy, finds them curiously foreshortened. Kind Madame Voisin, who will always be associated in her memory with the smell of wood ashes and waxed *parquets* and matutinal *café au lait;* the fluent professors at the *cours* which she attended while in Paris; crabbed old Dr. Flügelschläger, the renowned *Stadtmusikus* of the small German city to which she was subsequently removed, who alternated between hurling opprobrious epithets at her and enthusiastically kissing her talented little hands; Signor Bentivoglio, the rotund Florentine *maestro,* who at a later date did his best with a voice of small compass, but was fain to admit, raising his shoulders and spreading out his arms apologetically, that not very much was to be made out of it—all these and many other figures may have lost sharpness of outline when surveyed across the intervening barrier of briefer and more exciting experiences than are connected with their names.

Nevertheless, those eight years were, upon the whole, happy ones for her, and by no means unhappy for the Right Honourable James. While on his way toward becoming Right Honourable that statesman found that he had plenty of work to do—work of which he grew enamoured from the moment that he realized his capacity for doing it extremely well. His skill in debate was not long in meeting with recognition and reward; he was offered a subordinate post in a Conservative administration almost before he could be said to have won his spurs, and thence-

forth he advanced to fame with a rapidity which partially consoled Lady Wardlaw for his obstinate indifference to the charms of various ladies who were well fitted, in her opinion, to share his distinguished lot. After all, he got on better in private life than might have been anticipated; he did not—and indeed could not—affect the habits of a hermit. He dined out a good deal when in London, stayed with his friends in the country, and had occasional house-parties at Abbotswell, either Lady Wardlaw or his sister-in-law kindly officiating as hostess on such occasions. When the House rose in late summer, he invariably went off to join Cuckoo abroad and travel with her through some of the less frequented districts of Europe. He was wont to say that that gave him a more enjoyable holiday than the alternative of Wiltshire could have done, while Cuckoo, who was growing up into a highly accomplished young lady, was not eager to return to England until her education should be pronounced complete and her *début* in society be imminent.

It was on a certain November afternoon that Lady Wardlaw, who had come up to London for a week's shopping, received an unexpected visit from her cousin, and was informed by him that Abbotswell was at length about to welcome the future mistress of the house.

"I wish it were," she returned, laughing; "but you are past praying for, I know; I have given you up as a bad job. As for the child——"

"She isn't a child any more," interpolated James a little ruefully.

"I suppose not, and for that reason you must expect her to be the mistress of somebody else's house within a year."

Not quite so soon as that, James hoped.

"Oh, you had better be prepared for the probable consequences of a first season, spent under the wing of an elderly matchmaker like me, especially if she is pretty. By the way, what *is* she like nowadays?"

"It is so difficult to say. I want you and William to come down to us some time before Christmas, if you will, and then you will be able to form your own opinion. No, I don't think Cuckoo is pretty, but I should say that she was attractive. Yes, I think you would call her attractive."

"You are a queer creature, James," remarked Lady Wardlaw.

"So you are fond of telling me, Jane; but I don't strike myself as corresponding to that description. Perhaps what you mean is that I am unnaturally cold."

"Well, you choose to talk as if you were. It isn't a very good habit, you know. Not that it matters with me, because I am perfectly well aware that that child is the apple of your eye; but young people are rather apt to assume that their elders are what they appear to be. However, I dare say you and she understand one another."

James made no reply, but took his chin between his forefinger and thumb, supporting his left elbow with his right hand, while he gazed into space; that was the attitude which he most often adopted in the

House of Commons. Eight years, which had left distinct traces of their passage upon his companion's face and figure, had not perceptibly aged him. With his slim, spare person and his black hair, in which only a few white threads were beginning to show themselves, he might, at forty-two, have still passed for a young man, and in fact the political newspapers never failed to call him so. But youth and he had parted company at a period now so remote that he had half forgotten it, and that was why Jane Wardlaw's remark rendered him pensive.

"Well," he observed presently, without much apparent relevance, "I surrendered my educational theories, anyhow."

"As far as I ever understood what they were, there was nothing else to be done with them," Lady Wardlaw said. "No imaginative system of education can convert women into men."

"It is imaginable, though—at least I can imagine it—that a woman might be educated into looking at life from a man's point of view. However, as I say, I abandoned a task to which I was obviously unequal, and I am not dissatisfied with results, taking them all round."

Mr. Pennant would doubtless have been a somewhat unreasonable man had he felt dissatisfied with the charming little person whom he met at the Charing Cross Station that same evening, and who flung her arms round his neck before she was out of the railway carriage. If Cuckoo possessed no other claims to beauty, she had, at all events, those which are inseparable from youth—good health and good

spirits, added to which she was dressed, as she had always been for some years past, in perfect taste and in an admirably fitting costume. That she looked more like a Frenchwoman than an Englishwoman was perhaps scarcely surprising, and indeed her first words were spoken in a foreign tongue.

"*Enfin, nous voilà! une traversée atroce! Regardez donc cette malheureuse qui persiste à avoir le mal de mer en plein wagon de première classe!*"

James always disapproved of and discouraged Cuckoo's tendency to break out into French; but he pardoned her on this occasion, giving her credit for a humane desire to spare the feelings of the afflicted Budgett, who rose, yellow and forlorn, from the corner of the railway carriage in which she had been reclining, to groan tragically:

"Never again, my dear, no, not if you was to offer me a king's ransom! I'm on my own side of the English Channel now, and on my own side I will stay, please Heaven, for the rest of my life!"

James had more than once felt tempted to offer Budgett, if not a king's ransom, at least a handsome retiring pension, for neither her temper nor her manners had improved with lapse of time. But he believed the woman to be trustworthy, and Cuckoo liked her, and she had now become so established an institution that she could hardly be taken at her word when she gave warning—which she did, on an average, two or three times a year.

"Cheer up, Budgie," said Cuckoo reassuringly; "the *Wanderjahre* have come to an end for good and all. One doesn't quite know whether one is glad

or sorry," she added, turning to her father, who observed that he knew who was glad.

"It is nice of you to say so," returned the girl, giving his arm a little squeeze. "Well, if you're glad so am I—though I am not sure that we ought to be. There's a sort of a seriousness about this, isn't there?"

James nodded. "Yes, but not necessarily a disagreeable sort, I hope."

He put her into a hansom and seated himself beside her, leaving the man servant whom he had brought with him to look after Budgett and the luggage. Glancing at her, he mentally recanted what he had said to Lady Wardlaw. There were moments when Cuckoo really did look quite pretty, and this was one of them. She seemed, too, to be pleased at being with him once more; he thought he might venture to flatter himself that pleasure on that score, not merely a novel sense of emancipation and importance, accounted for the brightness of her shining eyes.

"We are going straight home, aren't we?" she asked presently. "That stupid old Parliament isn't sitting now to keep you in London, is it? Or must you be in London to attend to official botherations, whether Parliament is sitting or not?"

"The stupid old Parliament, as you call it, is enjoying a well-earned holiday," James replied. "As for me, I was relieved of the cares of office rather more than a year ago."

"Of course you were! I ought to be ashamed of myself for having forgotten that the wrong people

are in power, and that the empire is in danger of being betrayed to its destruction. But I am going to begin reading the newspapers carefully now. Only give me time, and I'll promise not to disgrace you by my ignorance of politics when I dawn upon an admiring world."

James was of opinion that there was no need for young ladies to be well posted with regard to matters of political controversy. He remarked that these were seldom interesting, save to the persons who took an active part therein.

"But I *want* to be interested in everything that interests you," the girl declared, turning quickly round upon him with the combined frown and smile which he had learned to associate with her, and which perhaps formed one of her attractions in his eyes.

"Then you had better take a profound interest in yourself, my dear," he returned, laughing.

Cuckoo nodded. "*C'est entendu! Ce ne sera pas trop difficile, du reste.* But I mean to bring an intelligent curiosity to bear upon public affairs as well, not to mention Abbotswell—poor, dear old Abbotswell, which I believe I love already more than you do, though I shall arrive there as a stranger."

It might safely be prophesied of Cuckoo that she would not long remain a stranger to any place or any person—unless, indeed, by an ironical freak of Fate, an exception had to be made in the case of her own father. That these two did not altogether understand one another each of them was regretfully aware; yet they were good friends, and hoped to be

better friends, now that they were to be separated no more.

As for Abbotswell, whither Mr. and Miss Pennant journeyed on the succeeding day, its conquest proved facile and rapid. The servants, the neighbours, the tenants surrendered at once to the easy familiarity and charm of manner which rendered the squire's daughter such a very different kind of person from the squire; even the crusty old housekeeper, who had made ready for battle, was fain to accept terms of peace; while Sam—now third gardener and a young man of ferocious shyness and taciturnity—though thrown into deep confusion on being reminded of that melancholy episode of the filched cigarettes, ended by grinning from ear to ear and blurting out:

"Well, miss, I ought to have had a proper good hiding, and that's the truth. But this was the way of it: You see I knowed as *I* shouldn't never be forgiven, and it would be a queer customer as wouldn't be willing to forgive *you* anything."

This graceful compliment on the part of Sam—which left him very red in the face—expressed the views of many excellent folks whose respect James Pennant possessed without having precisely won their affection. Cuckoo had taken them by storm as a child; she took them by storm for the second time now that she was a young woman, and the mere fact of her presence in that habitually silent and somewhat mournful mansion made all its denizens feel younger and happier. James had purchased a new grand piano for her use, and was

pleased to hear from her that it was a splendid instrument. After the first evening, however, she declined to perform upon it while he was in the room.

"There! that will do," she exclaimed, jumping up in the midst of a composition by Brahms, which obviously said nothing to him. "You don't like that kind of noise, do you?"

"I am afraid," James confessed, "that I can't pretend to be a judge of music, but it certainly seems to me that you play very well."

"Oh, yes," the girl agreed, laughing, "I play pretty well; all things considered, it would be rather odd if I didn't. But that is no reason why you should be bored. When Sir William Wardlaw comes I will go through my tricks for his benefit, and I trust he will have the good manners to clap his hands."

Sir William when he came did more than that; he skipped about the room in an appreciative ecstasy. Laying an eager hand upon his host's shoulder, he exclaimed: "My dear fellow, didn't I tell you so! I don't say it to exalt myself unduly, but I really *have* a nose for these things. Let me inform you, if you don't know it—and not for one moment do I suppose you do!—that you are the father of a young lady who could make a fortune in a few years by giving public recitals. That doesn't strike you as anything very extraordinary, eh? Well, it's so extraordinary as to be absolutely without a precedent in all my experience, which hasn't been a short one. Oh, I'm not talking about *technique*—hundreds and thousands of obscurities acquire an admirable *tech-*

nique. It's her touch, it's her phrasing, above all it's her distinctly personal rendering which amounts to nothing short of revelation. Upon my word, James, I could find it in my heart to wish that she would do something to make you cut her off with a sixpence! That would give her the chance of which it seems almost a sin that she should be deprived."

Lady Wardlaw, herself no mean musician, was a little less enthusiastic, but she acknowledged that no amateur of her acquaintance could hold a candle to this amazing Cuckoo. She was also—setting artistic capacities aside—greatly pleased with the girl, and repeated her prediction that Miss Pennant would not remain Miss Pennant long.

"One doesn't ask one's self whether she is a beauty or not; one simply recognises that she is adorable. William, as you see, is over head and ears in love with her already, and the young ones of course will follow suit. Didn't you say that you expected Harriet and her girls in a few days? What about her son?"

James laughed and shook his head. "I confess that Fitzroy is to follow," he answered; "but Heaven is my witness that I have no designs upon the poor young man. I didn't even invite him. It was his mother who gave me a hint by writing that unless she could be at home to receive him when he came down from Oxford he would have to betake himself to London, which she thought would be less healthy for him than knocking over my pheasants."

It will be perceived from this that a family arrangement which had palpable advantages to recom-

mend it was not likely to meet with parental opposition on either side. It was by this time understood and acknowledged that Fitzroy Pennant would some day succeed to the Abbotswell estate—so much so that he was now destined for the Guards, instead of, as had at one time been contemplated, for a more lucrative profession. His mother was of opinion that it would be no bad thing if he should take a fancy to James's daughter, and thought that, in any case, he might as well have a look at the girl. Without being precisely eager for the match—for, if it came to that, Fitz might easily do better as well as worse—she was quite willing to encourage it; so she proposed on this occasion to avail herself of her brother-in-law's hospitality for a somewhat longer period than usual.

She, too, after her arrival and brisk scrutiny of the little person at the head of the dinner table—that seat which she herself had, during former visits, been wont to occupy capably and capaciously—had an approving nod at James's service, and indeed it says something for Miss Cuckoo's tact that she contrived to take her proper place in the household without ruffling either of the ladies who had hitherto been in the habit of receiving her father's guests.

Moreover, she could ride—that part of her education not having been neglected during her long residence abroad—and Mrs. Arthur Pennant had no liking for girls who were not horsewomen. Not, to be sure, that Cuckoo knew anything like as much about the management of horses as her own daughters, Gwen and Ella, did; that was not to be ex-

pected. Still, she had nerves and light hands and a fairly good seat, added to which she was modestly ready to profit by instruction.

"You'll do," was the good lady's emphatic verdict after a run with the hounds, of which she saw a good deal more than Cuckoo did. "You have a lot to learn yet; but the girls will put you up to some wrinkles, and when Fitz comes he will very soon get you into shape."

Gwen and Ella, robust, fresh-complexioned young women, preserved from downright plainness by their clear blue eyes and erect carriage, gave comfirmatory testimony. Cuckoo found them pleasant enough as companions, and was amused by the admiring devotion with which they spoke of their brother.

"I remember," she remarked, "that when I was a small girl and he was a small boy I used to worship him. In all probability he has now become a patronizing, self-satisfied youth whom I shan't like a bit."

"Wait," cried Gwen and Ella in a breath, "until you have seen him!"

CHAPER VII.

THE DEVELOPED COUSINS.

Although James Pennant had few intimate friends (Lady Wardlaw declared that these might be counted upon one finger of one hand, representing herself), he had a rather large number of acquaintances, whom he had of late years fallen into the habit of entertaining by relays during the season, which offered some attraction to visitors in the form of sport. They now began to arrive, one after the other, until nearly all the spare bedrooms in a commodious house were occupied, and Cuckoo—duly coached by her future chaperon as to questions of precedence, and also with regard to what it behooved her to do, say, and avoid—had her work cut out to play the part of hostess, which to her father's masculine simplicity seemed the easiest thing in the world. She did play it with complete success, and found all these ladies and gentlemen, with a very few exceptions, both friendly and amusing. As, however, they have nothing particular to do with the progress of the present narrative, it is needless to detain the reader here with a list of their names or a description of their persons. A more interesting figure was about to step upon the stage

temporarily held by a well-dressed, well-mannered chorus, and of course Miss Pennant realized that a certain degree of interest must, if only from the circumstance of his being her father's heir presumptive, attach to the coming *jeune premier*.

It was by the above title that she mentally qualified or stigmatized him—which betrayed a shade of unwarranted prejudice on her part against the most modest and unassuming of gilded youths. Gilded Fitzroy Pennant unquestionably was, though not what in these days is accounted heavily so. About a twelvemonth earlier he had come into possession of the moderate fortune left by his father, Mrs. Arthur having money of her own; he would eventually, bar improbable accidents, succeed to an estate which was being extremely well managed by his uncle; he had now concluded his university career, and was upon the point of joining that brigade of Guards the younger officers of which, after all, represent adequately enough the *fine fleur* of British juvenility. When to this it is added that he was, by common consent, the handsomest undergraduate at Christ Church, besides being one of the most brilliant all-round athletes in England, no fair-minded person will deny that he had some right to give himself airs. Nor will he be refused the credit which was his due, in that it had never occurred to him to do anything of the sort.

He arrived one evening just before the dinner hour—a smiling, fair-haired giant, moving with the ease and grace of one whose limbs are at all times under perfect control—and the little lady of the

house who received him was almost obliged to stand on tiptoe in order to place her slim fingers within his big, outstretched palm.

"Dear me!" was her welcoming ejaculation, "you *have* grown!"

"I've had the time," he answered, laughing. Then, gazing down upon her. "I can't return the compliment—if it is a compliment. But, of course," he added, after a moment's consideration, "one wouldn't wish *you* to grow."

Whether that was a compliment or not seemed to be at least equally open to doubt, but the young man's manner implied that it had not been intended to be the reverse.

"I suppose," Cuckoo presently said, still surveying him critically with her head a little on one side, "you don't remember saying good-bye to me, out in the garden there, ages and ages ago?"

"I remember it as distinctly as possible," he replied, and his questioner was maliciously delighted to notice that he was neither too old nor too self-satisfied to colour becomingly at the recollection.

"Oh, don't be alarmed," she begged; "I really don't meditate doing it again. I was only wondering whether the you who aren't at all the you of those old days had forgotten the queer little mortal who inhabited what was then my skin. I've got another skin now, you know; everybody's skin, I believe, is completely renewed in the course of seven years."

"And is there another mortal inside yours?" Fitzroy made bold to inquire.

"Isn't that obvious? I meant it to be."

"Well," the young man declared, "I'm bound to say that I shouldn't have thought so if you hadn't told me. You strike me as being an uncommonly good imitation of what you were—and I'm very glad of it."

"Ah! well, I suppose you couldn't be expected to discern the improvement at a glance. It will impress itself gradually upon you during dinner, if you happen to overhear my conversation with the venerable old creature who is to take me in. Which reminds me that the dressing gong sounded a quarter of an hour ago. We shall keep them all waiting unless we look sharp."

It was not in Fitzroy's power, when he took his place at the long dinner table half an hour later, to catch what Cuckoo was saying to Lord Eastnor, the ex-Foreign Minister of the former Tory Cabinet, who occupied the chair on the left; as beseemed his humble rank, he was seated too far away from distinguished guests for that. But he noticed that she was vivacious, loquacious, absolutely at her ease, and that her neighbour's undivided attention was bestowed upon her. His own neighbour, a young lady who was no longer quite as young, nor perhaps quite as amiable, as she had been prior to half a dozen London seasons, followed the direction of his gaze and remarked:

"Oh, yes; you are quite right, your cousin is extraordinary. If she is like this before she is even out, what will she be next year, or the year after? And the most extraordinary thing of all about her is that nobody can help liking her. One doesn't, as

a rule, like people who are so awfully clever, do you think so?"

"I don't know. I always liked Cuckoo, and she was always awfully clever," Fitzroy replied.

"Really? Well, that is quite as it should be; for, of course, you know that she is your manifest destiny."

The young fellow showed his even white teeth in a laugh which was entirely free from embarrassment or self-consciousness. "Because of the property, you mean? But that sort of thing never comes off, and I don't believe Uncle James has any such notion in his head. I should think, too, that Cuckoo might consider herself entitled to look a little higher."

On being questioned as to whether it was or was not the case that the girl would have a lot of money, and plied with other interrogations which struck him as savouring slightly of impertinence, he answered a little curtly that he really knew nothing at all about it, and changed the subject. He was in the happy position of being heart-whole; he had hitherto been too constantly engaged upon the serious business of keeping himself in fit condition for athletic contests to devote his few leisure hours to the pastime of flirtation, and, so far as he could judge, his cousin was not at all likely to disturb the accustomed serenity of his sleep and digestion. Still, the brief talk that he had had with her before dinner had stirred up in him a decided wish for a renewal of their old alliance, and he thereupon said to himself that he did hope there was not going to be any con-

founded nonsense of the nature just alluded to. Because, if there was, both Cuckoo's comfort and his own would be necessarily and fatally compromised. It occurred to him that he might perhaps as well say a word or two to his sisters. Giving them clearly to understand that he had neither hopes, expectations, nor intentions would, he felt sure, be tantamount to rising there and then and making the same announcement in a loud tone of voice for the benefit of the assembled company.

There was, however, no immediate need for summoning the garrulous Gwen and Ella to his assistance. He satisfied himself of that in the course of the evening, when occasion was given him to discover that his accomplished cousin asked for nothing better than the frank, unsentimental intimacy which he desired. He had the privilege of some intermittent conversation with her; he joined others in applauding the marvellous things that she contrived to do with the piano (although, like his uncle, he was fain to confess that he did not know very much about music); finally, after the older ladies had gone upstairs to bed, he was able to admire her still in an art about which he did know something—the playing of pool.

"This borders upon the miraculous," he remarked, after seeing her successfully clear the table. "One was more or less prepared for a female Rubinstein, but one really didn't quite expect to be potted by a female Roberts. May I venture to ask whether there is anything at all that you *can't* do?"

It will be seen from the above question that

amongst her capabilities was that of setting a diffident and slightly apprehensive young man completely at his ease. But she hastened to assure him that, although she had a superficial acquaintance with many arts and sciences, she was proficient only in a very few.

"Father insisted upon my taking some lessons in billiards, just as he insisted upon my being taught to swim and fence and box. He said all that could do me no harm and might do me some good. But I am as certain as I am of my own existence that when you have seen me on a horse you will have to turn your head aside to conceal your emotion. If you were what I should like you to be, a species of good-natured elder brother, you would offer me a few days' schooling."

He asked for nothing better (how clever it was of her to have divined that! he thought) than to be treated as a good-natured elder brother, and the schooling which she requested was entirely at her service. On the following day, which was a non-hunting day, he rode out with her and told her unhesitatingly and unequivocally what her faults were. She had been badly taught in some respects, he said; still, there was no reason why she should not very soon learn to ride to hounds almost, if not quite, as well as Gwen and Ella—no reason, except a shift of the wind to the northeast, which brought a sharp frost and enabled the shooting men to have things all their own way. He himself was an excellent shot; Cuckoo and the other ladies in the house paid their due tribute of applause to a prowess of which

they were admiring witnesses, and, had he been a conceited young man, he might have thought, as sundry wellwishers of his did, that his cousin's hand was to be obtained by him at any moment for the asking.

Was it in order to correct any such possible and unwarrantable assumption on his part that Cuckoo, after a day or two, begun to neglect him in favour of certain of her father's guests who were likewise young, marriageable, eligible, and very well able to lay rocketing pheasants low? Such, at all events, was the line of conduct which she was pleased to take up, and, to tell the truth, he did not much like it. He even went so far as to address a few words of private and kindly admonition to her. It was a pity, he said, to go in for flirting; no man who was worth twopence really liked a flirt.

"Are any of these men worth twopence?" Cuckoo interrupted him by inquiring. "Because, if they aren't, of course it doesn't matter; and if they are——"

"What if they are?"

"Well, then, I would hope they would be neither rude enough nor stupid enough to call me a flirt for trying to amuse them. Isn't it my duty to amuse them?"

Fitzroy rather grudgingly supposed that it was. Only there were various ways of amusing people; some quite unobjectionable, others which—perhaps owing to his personal rudeness and stupidity—he should avoid, if he were in her place.

"Such as, for instance?" she meekly asked.

"Oh, *you* know! Sitting in corners with fellows, and—and that sort of thing."

Cuckoo nodded gravely. "I see; many thanks for warning me. If there are any corners in the Town Hall, where the Hunt Ball is to be held on Thursday, I will make a point of shying away from them. It is all the more important that I should behave nicely on that occasion, as Lady Wardlaw doubts very much whether I ought to appear even at a country ball before having been presented."

"Are the rest of us going to appear?"

"I am not sure about my father, who will make haste to catch an excusing cold in the head, if he possibly can. My poor father foresees that he will soon be compelled to attend balls in London, and he doesn't want to be tormented before his time."

This dialogue took place in the drawing-room, shortly after five o'clock tea, and Lady Wardlaw, who chanced to be seated near the young people, overheard the last words spoken by one of them.

"Your father," she remarked, "has given me *carte blanche* to represent him at the London balls. If he is anxious to shirk this provincial function, most likely it is because he has heard that the Rochdales are staying in the neighbourhood, and because one room won't hold him and Lord Rochdale." She beckoned to her cousin, and when he appeared asked: "Isn't it true that you would rather take to your bed with congestion of the lungs than meet Lord Rochdale at a ball or anywhere else?"

James smiled. "I don't like the man, I confess," he answered; "I think him both incompetent

and dangerous as Secretary of State for the Colonies, and I have had to say as much publicly. Still, I dare say we can meet in private without flying at one another's throats."

"I can't meet his wife without flying at hers," Lady Wardlaw candidly avowed. "If the woman had any sort of right to give herself the insufferable airs that she does one might make shift to put up with her; but, considering that she is an absolute nobody by birth, it is rather more than one's philosophy can endure to be offered two fingers of her left hand, and told how sorry she is that she can't find room for everybody at her economical squashes."

A neighbouring lady chimed in with confirmatory remarks, and from the chorus of voices which presently arose it became evident that Lord and Lady Rochdale were not popular persons. They were, it appeared, very "smart" and notoriously half ruined; they were much given to quartering themselves for indefinite periods upon well-to-do acquaintances; their chief mission in life—so Cuckoo's sharp eyes and ears, which were ever open for the reception of fresh impressions, gathered—was to give offence to everybody, including their entertainers, with whom they were brought in contact, and they fulfilled their mission by means of an aggressive and uncalled-for self-assertion. She was wondering why they should think it worth while to make so many enemies when she was made aware that they had at least one friend in the person of Fitzroy, who raised the voice of mild expostulation to say:

"Oh, come! they aren't so bad as all that, you

know. I rather like the old woman myself; her bark is a good deal worse than her bite."

"Perhaps," observed Lady Wardlaw, "she hasn't bitten you yet, young man. Why should she bite young men of moderate means and good expectations—or bark at them either? However, if you would like to find out what she can do in the way of snarling, you have only to speak of her to her face as you have just done behind her back. I doubt whether she will submit tamely to be called an old woman."

"What," Cuckoo afterward took occasion to inquire of her cousin, "are Lady Rochdale's daughters like?"

"The married ones, do you mean?"

"No, the unmarried ones."

"Oh, well, there's only one left—Lady Elizabeth. I don't know much about her, but of course she's pretty; they're all pretty."

The off-hand, careless tone in which Fitzroy made this announcement was perhaps a trifle overdone; at all events, he might have remembered that his sisters were sure to betray the circumstance of his being one of Lady Elizabeth Tufnell's reputed admirers. But even if they did, why should he mind, seeing that he was not one of Cuckoo Pennant's admirers, and was particularly anxious that no mistake should be made upon that point. For the rest, he respectfully admired more ladies than one, and hoped to retain the right of free admiration until he should be a good many years older.

What was neither fair nor reasonable of him was

that he should wish to curtail his cousin's liberty in a similar direction, and it was owing to the adoption of this inadmissible attitude on his part that Cuckoo's first ball was made the occasion of something like a rupture of amicable relations between them.

Cuckoo danced quite beautifully, and, as a natural consequence, she had more partners, or would-be partners, than there were dances on the programme. That was all right, Fitzroy said, and if somebody must needs be thrown over no doubt it was better that a blood relation should be treated in that way than a mere acquaintance, who might be foolish enough to take offence. At the same time, he must take the liberty of repeating what he had said before, that it was rather a pity to start by showing marked preferences and by bolting undisguisedly from a man who, after all, had been allowed to write his name twice on your card. "Lots of girls do it, of course, only it isn't generally considered very good form, you know."

Cuckoo's answer was quite ready. "Considering that here we are, it is evident that I can't have bolted from you, with or without disguise. I may have been wrong in supposing that the last dance, not this one, was ours; but, as I have unfortunately lost my card, there's no knowing whether the mistake was yours or mine. If it is a mistake to show marked preferences—but really I am not conscious of having shown any—you are hardly the proper person to say so, after dancing four times in succession with Lady Elizabeth Tufnell—who, by the way,

is even prettier than you led me to expect. Won't you go back to her now? She looks as if she rather wondered why you didn't."

"I would rather keep my engagement to you, thanks," said Fitzroy.

"But I am engaged to somebody else for this dance, you see, and somebody else is showing signs of impatience. Never mind—I forgive you."

She moved away on the arm of a young man who had been hovering near her during the above colloquy, and Fitzroy was fain to act as she had suggested. Lady Elizabeth Tufnell was unquestionably pretty, with her round, babyish face, her china-blue eyes, and the artistically careless arrangement of her brown locks. Some people said that she was also very silly, very affected, and very conceited; but the ill nature of some people knows no bounds. Fitzroy liked her so much that he was willing, for her sake, to discover amiable qualities even in her mother, a rough-tongued lady of fine physical proportions, whose cheeks were thickly powdered and whose wig and eyebrows would not have deceived an infant. As for Lord Rochdale, nobody in the House of Lords or the Colonial Office or anywhere else had ever credited that pompous, dull-witted, obstinate personage with amiability, and the cold in the head which his political opponent at Abbotswell had fulfilled prophecy by catching seemed to stand in need of no explanation. James Pennant was habitually courteous to political opponents, while Lord Rochdale was habitually and upon principle the reverse.

That, however, did not prevent his lordship from

being the father of numerous charming daughters, with one of whom Fitzroy spent the greater part of an evening, which was subsequently pronounced by the Abbotswell party to have been particularly cheery and enjoyable. Driving homeward in the omnibus between three and four o'clock in the morning, he was privileged to hear how much Cuckoo, for one, had enjoyed it. But her remarks were not addressed to him, nor had he anything to say to her. Their conduct was so exactly that of a pair of lovers who have had a tiff that Lady Wardlaw, in her dark corner, had a sleepy laugh over it all to herself. Yet it was just because they were not lovers that they were somewhat seriously angry with one another. One of them had been lectured, the other had been snubbed, and each one was aggrievedly aware that the sufficient excuse of jealousy was wanting. So they did not even exchange a civil good night at the end of the long drive.

CHAPTER VIII.

HARRY CAREW.

THERE was no covert shooting the next day, none of the young men in the house feeling in trim for it; but after luncheon Fitzroy and his uncle strode out with their guns to get a little exercise and take what chance might send them in the way of ground game and hedgerow pheasants. These two, who had many qualities in common, liked and understood one another, so they had a pleasant, quiet afternoon together, notwithstanding the bitter northeast wind which was not, perhaps, quite the best thing in the world for a man with a cold in his head. It appeared, however, that Mr. Pennant's cold was not a very bad one.

"I felt bound to catch it by sitting for an hour in wet boots the other day," he explained to his companion; "but as soon as it had served its purpose I considered myself at liberty to employ remedies."

"I rather wish," observed Fitzroy, after a pause, "that you didn't hate them so much."

There was no need for him to mention names, and James at once replied: "Oh, I don't hate them; I would a little rather not meet them, that's all. They are bad-mannered people."

"But not Lady Elizabeth," pleaded the young man; "I really don't think anybody could call her bad-mannered. In fact, I was in hopes that perhaps she and Cuckoo would make friends."

James glanced quickly at the speaker, perceiving immediately all that that simple assertion might be intended to imply. Of course he would have been glad if kind Heaven had prompted his nephew and his daughter to take a fancy to one another, and of course he was aware that the possibility of their doing so must have suggested itself to others besides Jane Wardlaw. But for no earthly consideration would he have brought any semblance of pressure to bear upon either of the parties principally concerned.

"Cuckoo," he remarked, "will never be in the Rochdales' set; we are neither rich enough nor fashionable enough for that. I don't doubt, though, that the young lady's manners are as charming as her face. You might make a worse choice, Fitz—if that is what you are thinking about."

Fitz hastened to protest that he was not thinking about anything of the sort, but he did not pursue the subject further. What he really wanted to say was that he had accepted an invitation to stay with the Rochdales, and that he hoped his uncle would not mind his leaving Abbotswell, on that account, a little earlier than had been arranged. The occasion, however, scarcely seemed propitious for making this announcement, and it was to his cousin that he imparted the news at a later hour.

Cuckoo, much to his relief, had completely re-

covered her good humour when he approached her after dinner. She made no allusion to the episodes of the previous evening, and apparently took it for granted that, if he had been a little cross then (as he certainly had been), he was so no longer.

"Oh, yes, that will be rather jolly for you, won't it?" said she, after he had, in a somewhat awkward and shame-faced manner, avowed his contemplated desertion. "I am sorry you have to go so soon, because I looked forward to the end of the frost and a few more riding lessons. Still, I dare say I may be able to lay my hand upon a substitute. All these men profess to be competent instructors."

"And perhaps," Fitzroy ventured to suggest, "you would let me come back later?"

"If we are still here; but we are to go up to London, I believe, as soon as Parliament opens."

There was an interval of silence, at the end of which the young man blurted out abruptly. "I say, Cuckoo, I'm afraid you thought I was impertinent last night. I didn't mean to be, you know; but—but, after all, you *are* my cousin, and—and it isn't as if you had a mother."

Cuckoo laughed so heartily that the tears came into her eyes—and, of course, it could only have been excessive merriment that brought them there.

"I never heard of anything more touching than your wish to be a mother to me!" she exclaimed. "After that, one feels that such a word as impertinence would be quite out of place. Not that I thought you impertinent."

"I didn't mean to be," the young man repeated.

"*C'est compris.* And I'll do my best to avoid sitting in corners after your maternal eye has ceased to keep watch over me. Can I say more?"

If she had said less he might have been better pleased—so difficult is it to give satisfaction to some people! But she was, at any rate, not affronted with him for having accepted the hospitality of her father's political enemy, which, no doubt, showed a certain magnanimity on her part. He went away after a day or two, and if his departure was resented by anybody, it was neither by his mother, who was fully alive to the social advantages that were likely to accrue to him from an intimacy with the Rochdales, nor by Lady Wardlaw, who was convinced that she could make a much finer and less commonplace match for Cuckoo than that to which the girl seemed predestined by the circumstance that the Abbotswell estates were entailed.

Lady Wardlaw herself soon quitted the scene of these preliminary operations. She was a popular person who always had innumerable engagements, and she had now seen enough—so she assured James—to feel confident that there would be no sort of difficulty about establishing his daughter.

"I'll present her at one of the late Drawing-rooms," she said. "There is nothing to be gained by catching one's death of cold on the way to the early ones, and we will take care that she has as much mild Lenten gaiety as is good for her while you are busy fighting the Radicals in the House. Oh, don't talk nonsense! it stands to reason that she must and

will marry *somebody*. Somebody nice, of course; I only know nice people."

That assertion may have been a trifle overbold (for what can even the most exclusive lady know about the private characters of all her acquaintances?), yet it was perhaps near enough to the truth for practical purposes, and James, when he took Cuckoo up to the house in Ennismore Gardens which he had hired for the season, was disposed to rely upon it. This move was made in the beginning of February, by which time Fitzroy, who had not reappeared at Abbotswell, had joined the battalion of Guards to which he had been gazetted. His cards were discovered among many others upon the hall table shortly after the father and daughter had entered upon possession of their temporary residence; but when James suggested that he had better be asked to dinner, Cuckoo demurred.

"I have found out," said she, "that it bores you to have people to dinner, and as I am still supposed to be in the chrysalis stage, why should either of us be bored? We can do all that is due from us in the entertaining way when we have been duly entertained. For the present, let us be domestically happy."

It may be that domestic felicity is not very easily attainable by a man immersed in public affairs; it may also be that James Pennant's ideas of what constitutes domestic felicity differed radically from his daughter's. The latter, anyhow, was forced ere long to the conclusion that she counted for remarkably little in her father's scheme of existence. Either

in consequence of that or of some other unacknowledged reason that she may have had for feeling restless and ill at ease, the solitude of London—which is such a very different thing from the solitude of the country—oppressed her, and she developed a longing for amusement of some kind, or any kind, which good-natured Lady Wardlaw, on her arrival at Berkeley Square, found quite natural and did her best to satisfy.

This, as beseemed the season of the year and the tastes of the persons concerned, took for the most part the form of concerts, public and private. Sir William was enchanted by the appreciative comments of his young relative on such occasions, as well as by the genuine successes which she herself more than once achieved. He declared that she had the soul of an artist and the imagination of a creative genius. Lady Wardlaw's criticism showed more discrimination.

"I don't know so much about creating, but I observe that she is extraordinarily clever at imitating. One will have to be a little careful about the models that one sets before her, I suspect."

For the rest, this childless couple soon became warmly attached to the girl, whose affectionate nature responded the more readily because it had so little scope for expansion at home. She lived rather in Berkeley Square than in Ennismore Gardens, where, indeed, James was never to be seen between the hours of breakfast and dinner, nor always at the latter. A vigilant Opposition had its hands very full just then; prominent politicians were apt to be de-

tained at Westminster half the night through, and the wives and daughters of prominent politicians had perforce to dispense with their company.

"But all that is quite as it should be," Lady Wardlaw told one of these, whose occasionally wistful expression of countenance she was clever enough to trace to its cause; "some men have no faculty for graceful idleness. Without that thrice-blessed House of Commons your father wouldn't know what to do with himself—and he wouldn't know what to do with you either. So it is just as well that William and I, who *do* know, should be upon the spot."

Cuckoo gratefully acknowledged that it was. The thing to be done with her at that particular juncture was doubtless to amuse her, and for the accomplishment of this end her good friends in Berkeley Square were far better equipped than her father could pretend to be. Their spacious house was never empty; the guests, young and old, to whom she was introduced by them found her charming—as indeed they well might—and her powers of quick observation enabled her to derive a good deal of entertainment from the study of their several peculiarities. She was, as has been mentioned before, an excellent mimic; Sir William delighted in getting her to reproduce the accent and gait of certain among his wife's intimates, which she did with marvellous exactitude. Lady Wardlaw laughed, but disapproved.

"You will get yourself into trouble some day with this talent of yours, my dear girl," she predicted. "Did you never hear of the monkey who

aped his master's shaving operations so successfully that he cut his own throat?"

The allegorical parallel was not, perhaps, very likely to be borne out in the sense contemplated by Lady Wardlaw; for Cuckoo was too essentially sympathetic to be spiteful. Yet she was then, as she always has been and always will be, in some danger of being led astray by that same fatal quality of sympathy, which prompted her instantly to detect and make the most liberal allowances for everybody's point of view. *Tout comprendre,* says the proverb, *c'est tout pardonner,* and it must be admitted that there are conditions of human sentiment and conduct which, in the interest of public morality, are best not pardoned too readily. Harry Carew, for instance, as all the world knew, deserved neither pardon nor sympathy, though he was fond of claiming the later, and it was rather a pity that he should have conceived the liking and admiration for Miss Pennant which he avowed, with his customary candour, on the occasion of their first meeting.

"Oh, he is a deplorable miscreant," Lady Wardlaw said, in answer to some questions that Cuckoo put respecting a man toward whom she had felt somewhat powerfully attracted. "In fact, if it were not that I have known him from his childhood, and that one doesn't wish to show the cold shoulder to his poor little wife, I should have given up asking him to the house long ago."

"But what has he done?" Cuckoo inquired.

"I couldn't possibly tell you in language fit for your ears. Everything in the world that a de-

cent husband—or even an ordinarily indecent one—couldn't have done! And the money is all hers, too, which makes it worse. If she were to divorce him to-morrow, as she would be amply justified in doing, he would be a beggar, or something very like it."

"It is principally because she is so religious that he can't manage to hit it off with her," Cuckoo remarked. "He has no religion himself, and he is very sorry for it; he wishes he had. But of course it doesn't encourage him much to be shown every day how bitter and unforgiving some religious people can be."

"So he has told you already that he can't hit it off with his wife, and that he has no religion, and that he wishes he had! I never knew Harry fail to open an acquaintance in that way—after preliminary compliments. He praised your playing, no doubt, and mentioned that it had affected him as nobody else's playing had done in his recollection. Well, it is fortunate that he is old enough to be your father."

"Thirty-five," said Cuckoo.

"Forty-three, if he is a day; I know his age as well as I do my own. It is because he has no heart and no conscience that he looks ten years younger than he really is. People of that sort never earn any honourable scars. You must have made rapid strides in the direction of familiarity with him to have reached the point of inquiring how many seasons he had weathered."

Cuckoo's strides in the direction of familiarity

with anybody and everybody were always apt to be rapid, and this handsome, easy-mannered gentleman, whom she met at dinner in Berkeley Square one evening, and who gave her the impression of being very much like an overgrown school boy, had shown every disposition to be familiarly treated. Bearing the worst of reputations, he nevertheless retained many friends of the highest respectability—friends who, like Lady Wardlaw, generally excused themselves upon the plea of their reluctance to make his ill-used wife suffer for his misdeeds, but who in truth probably kept a warm corner in their hearts for so amiable a rascal.

"Anyhow," said Lady Wardlaw, when James subsequently requested information about "some people called Carew, with whom Cuckoo appears to have struck up a sudden intimacy" and who had twice invited her to accompany her to the theatre, "it isn't, to do him justice, his habit to lay siege to the affections of *ingénues*, so I don't think there is any need for alarm. After a fashion, he will make love to her, no doubt—he would make love, after a fashion, to his grandmother or to an infant in arms—but his wife (who is a monster of jealousy, poor little wretch) may be trusted to keep him within the limits of strict propriety under his own roof. Added to which, Cuckoo is quite clever enough to see the joke of him."

Whether Mrs. Carew and Cuckoo deserved or not the confidence thus reposed in them, the former made frequent friendly overtures to which the latter willingly responded. Mrs. Carew was a faded, anxious-

looking woman, who had many grievances and liked to talk about them. In Cuckoo she found—as did also her husband—a patient and interested listener. If both parties to an unending matrimonial quarrel lacked reticence and dignity, both were refreshingly comprehensible, as well as entitled, apparently, to compassion. Moreover, Cuckoo was young enough to feel flattered at being let into the domestic secrets of her neighbours. Within a very short space of time, therefore, she became *l'amie de la maison* in Chesham Place, where the Carews dwelt, and if of the two she preferred the sinner to the saint, she did not differ in that respect from others who were perhaps better able to judge of their respective virtues and vices.

"One can't be thankful enough that Julia has taken such a fancy to you," Harry Carew remarked. "As a rule, she honours everybody whom I like with so intense a hatred that, for the sake of peace and quietness, I have to try not to like a soul whom she knows."

"By all accounts you like a good many people whom she can't know," observed Cuckoo dryly.

"Oh, yes, I fully admit it; I admit everything that can be urged against my character—which is too poor a thing to be worth defending at this time of day. All the same, neither I nor the people about whom you seem to have been told are quite as black as we're painted."

"You would have to be black indeed to be as black as that!"

"I suppose so. May the dazzling whiteness of

Julia make some amends! I often wonder," continued Mr. Carew in pensive accents, "what on earth made me marry Julia."

"Hush!" whispered Cuckoo apprehensively; "she'll hear you."

For this dialogue took place in the stalls of a theatre, whither Miss Pennant had been conducted by her friends, and it did not seem certain that the fourth member of the small party, a young man who was seated beyond Mrs. Carew, was exerting himself as much as he ought to have been to engross her attention. She did not, however, appear to have caught a remark to which the answer was easy and obvious. Everybody, including poor Julia, knew perfectly well that her scapegrace of a husband had married her because she was possessed of an independent fortune. Even Cuckoo, prejudiced though she was in favour of the said scapegrace, was aware of that discreditable fact, and to avoid the necessity of alluding to it she turned her back upon her neighbour, scanning the boxes through her opera glasses.

From one of these a signal of recognition presently reached her. It was Fitzroy, towering magnificently behind two ladies, who bowed, smiled, waved his hand, and then proceeded to raise his eyebrows after a fashion which was probably meant to be significant. What the precise signification of that grimace might be Cuckoo did not feel bound to understand—although, as a matter of fact, she could guess.

"Who is your friend?" Harry Carew inquired.

"Oh, your young cousin, isn't it? Happy young cousin! what wouldn't I give to be in his shoes! A good-looking guardsman, with as much money as he wants and more to follow, not to mention his being a first-rate all-round sportsman and the best long-distance runner of his year—one can't very well beat that, you know. Ah, Miss Cuckoo, why don't you marry the poor boy, and rescue him from the clutches of old Lady Rochdale, whom he won't find a pleasant mother-in-law, though she is smiling so sweetly at him just now."

"I am afraid," answered Cuckoo composedly, "that he doesn't mean to give me the chance."

"You make me wish more than ever that I stood in the shoes which he isn't worthy to wear!"

Cuckoo made no rejoinder. The curtain had risen, and possibly what was taking place upon the stage interested her more than Harry Carew or Fitzroy Pennant had it in their power to do. The latter, however, contrived to say something rather interesting when the performance had come to an end and when he forced his way through the retreating throng on the staircase to shake hands with his cousin.

"What *are* you doing with that fellow?" he asked, in a voice of unconcealed displeasure. "Does Uncle James really think that the Carews are the right sort of people to take you about?"

"It seems so," replied Cuckoo. "What is the matter with them, please?"

"There is nothing the matter with *her* that I know of; but Carew!—well, all I can say is that

I should be very sorry to see him whispering into the ear of one of my sisters at a theatre."

Cuckoo laughed. The pictured peril to the homely Gwen and Ella did not strike her as particularly alarming. "I might as well say," she returned, "that I should be sorry to see my brother, if I had one, whispering into the ear of Lady Rochdale—who, *par parenthèse*, is beckoning frantically to you at this moment. You will have to tell me some other time why you object so strongly to poor Mr. Carew. He doesn't object at all to you; he has been paying you some very pretty compliments."

"I don't want his compliments," Fitzroy was rude enough to reply, "and I can tell you now in half a dozen words why I object to him. He is a thorough-paced blackguard."

CHAPTER IX.

DOUBTFUL COMPANY.

To call a man a thorough-paced blackguard is, no doubt, to employ very strong language; but the unfortunate fact is that Harry Carew's apologists, if he had had any, must needs have admitted that they were in no position to resent such descriptions of him as might be given by the virtuously indignant. All that could be said for him, and all that ever was said for him, was that it was impossible to help liking the man; nobody had the temerity to assert that he deserved to be liked—nobody, that is, except Cuckoo, who was but vaguely acquainted with the episodes of his past career, and who, when her cousin found her at home on the ensuing afternoon, was quite in the mood to stand up as devil's advocate against a young man so self-confident and so uncharitable toward others.

"Oh, of course, if Uncle James doesn't object, and if Lady Wardlaw doesn't object, that's final," Fitzroy somewhat ungraciously owned. "I must say I should have thought that a fellow with a history like Carew's—a fellow who has actually had to take his name off the books at his club in order to avoid a threatened inquiry into certain turf scandals,

not to mention Heaven knows how many scandals of another kind in which he has been mixed up—I must say I should have thought that he would be upon their black list. But one lives and learns!"

"I sincerely hope that when you have lived a little longer, Fitz," returned Cuckoo, "you will have learnt to be a little less unjust and ungenerous."

She proceeded to give him some of the reasons—they were not, to be sure, very convincing reasons—that she had for doubting whether he in the least understood the man whom he was pleased to denounce, and ended by asking him whether he really thought that association with Mr. Carew was likely to result in her being warned off Newmarket heath.

He really thought that it might have other results almost as discreditable; but these were rather difficult to paticularize, and he was fain to repeat that if his uncle saw no objection to so undesirable an intimacy, it was not for him to lift up his voice in opposition to it.

"Only," he remarked, "you may as well be prepared for what is quite certain, that people will notice it and say disagreeable things about it. Lady Rochdale——"

"Lady Rochdale," interrupted Cuckoo, "is, of course, universally beloved and admired, and I don't wonder at your attaching great importance to her opinion. But, personally, I happen to regard her as a malevolent, painted old hag—which accounts for my not caring a pin what she says or thinks. Her daughter, I suppose, disapproves of me as much as she does?"

Fitzroy shook his head. "Lady Elizabeth," he stoutly declared, "is as good and kind a girl as there is; she told me she would like to know you, and she has heard a lot about your playing and—and all that. Besides, Lady Rochdale never said she disapproved of *you*." He added, after a momentary pause, "I shouldn't have allowed her to say such a thing."

Cuckoo was at once mollified. "Wouldn't you?" she asked. "Well, then, we won't quarrel over it, Fitz. I haven't such a superfluity of friends that I can afford to lose either you or the Carews, and—after all, why should one wish one's friends to be absolutely immaculate? Suppose we talk about something else? About Lady Elizabeth Tufnell, for instance, who, I am sure, looks immaculate enough for anything."

Perhaps Fitzroy was not very eager to talk about that young lady; still, on being pressed, he felt in honour bound to give her unstinted praise. She was as amiable as she was pretty, she had many accomplishments—such as painting in water colours and playing the banjo with remarkable skill—she had no "side" ("*Oh!*" Cuckoo could not refrain from interjecting), and in short, it was only necessary to know her in order to appreciate her. So he was dismissed finally with the assurance that it would give his cousin much pleasure to become better acquainted with this paragon.

That several subsequent encounters and brief exchange of civilities with the paragon led Cuckoo to conclude that Lady Elizabeth was silly, insipid, and

airified was scarcely wonderful; for in truth her judgment was not greatly in fault in the matter, and women seldom see one another as men see them. Moreover, the Rochdales moved in such very exalted circles that a friendship between their daughter and Miss Pennant could only be the result of a species of condescension, to which the latter had no notion of submitting. The Carews suited her a great deal better, and with the Carews she became, accordingly, more and more closely allied.

She was taken by them to various suburban race meetings—which Mrs. Carew attended, not because racing had the faintest interest for her, but because she deemed it her duty to keep an eye, so far as might be possible, upon her volatile husband—and thus she acquired knowledge of the kind which may or may not be inherently worth possessing, but which is invariably deprecated by those who are without it. To Cuckoo it was so impossible to like people without also liking the things which they liked that she soon assimilated something of Harry Carew's passionate excitement over the result of a handicap. This, of course, was not diminished by the circumstance that Harry was obliging enough to back his fancy for a trifle on her behalf, but upon the subject of such transactions nothing was said to his wife, who held that all betting was essentially immoral.

"If you only knew what it has cost us!" the poor woman sighed, when she was standing, one afternoon, in the paddock at Sandown with the girl with whom she had fallen into the habit of confiding some of her woes. "The flat racing season is not

quite so bad, because then, I believe, Harry does sometimes win a little; but these wretched steeplechases and hurdle races always seem to go the wrong way, owing, as he says, to some accident which nobody could have foreseen. As if anybody could ever foresee an accident! The whole thing ought to be forbidden. If lotteries are illegal, why shouldn't betting be?"

Cuckoo could not say; but she sagely remarked that some men, if not all men, required amusement and would insist upon having it, in one form or another.

"Oh, if you mean that racing helps to keep Harry out of even worse mischief, perhaps you are right. But it is a terribly expensive remedy, and—after all, one never knows! It doesn't keep him out of bad company, I'm afraid."

She glanced obliquely at her husband, who was to be seen at that moment strolling across the grass beside an overdressed lady, unknown to Cuckoo. "Don't you think," she asked piteously, "that he might at least spare me these public exhibitions? I wish you would say something to him about it; you have much more influence over him than I have."

The compliment was not a particularly high one, for there were probably very few women who could not boast of more influence over Harry Carew than fell to his wife's share. Still, such as it was, it touched Cuckoo in her most vulnerable spot. She loved to count for something in the opinions and conduct of her neighbours; it flattered her to be appealed to—as she frequently was—for help by one

or the other of these ill-matched persons, and when, half an hour later, Harry came to condole with her upon the loss of the two five-pound notes with which she had intrusted him, she duly made the requested remonstrance.

"Why do you do that sort of thing?" she was now sufficiently intimate with him to ask. "You know it never fails to enrage her."

Harry, with a gesture which was habitual to him, pushed his hat on to the back of his head, stuck his hands in his pockets, and made a rueful grimace. "If you will tell me," he answered, "what I can possibly do, short of distributing tracts by the wayside or accepting a commission in the Salvation Army, which *isn't* pretty certain to enrage Julia, I shall feel deeply indebted to you. Surely it is permitted to talk for five minutes in the broad light of day to a woman with whom I have been acquainted almost all my life!"

Cuckoo shook her head. "That depends! Anyhow, you might refuse yourself the privilege, rather than give offence."

"My dear Miss Pennant, why don't you advise me to abolish myself at once? I'm one great big offence from the crown of my head to the sole of my foot, and I shall never be anything else. I assure you it wouldn't be the slightest use to try."

He was given to speaking of himself in that way, and the air of blithe irresponsibility with which he did so was apt to produce the effect upon his hearer which it was doubtless intended to produce.

Cuckoo laughed a little and said: "I suppose you are incorrigible."

"Absolutely, I'm afraid," he replied, with undiminished cheerfulness.

But when he was begged, as a personal favour to Miss Pennant, to go and sit beside Julia just for five minutes, he at once complied.

"If you put it like that, I'll do my best to stand on my head for five minutes," he declared.

In affirming, as she had done, that Harry Carew would make love, after a fashion, to his grandmother or to an infant in arms Lady Wardlaw had been guilty of no great exaggeration. It came so naturally to him, in his relations with the opposite sex, to talk to the one who chanced to be nearest at hand as though she, and she alone, might command him anything that he could scarcely be held answerable for the misconceptions which sometimes arose from that habit of his. But if Cuckoo did not understand his little ways, it was not for want of having been warned what they were, nor is there any reason to doubt the sincerity of the assurances which she had by this time more than once received from him that he regarded her with an affection half paternal, half fraternal in its essence. Therefore she smiled and nodded, saying "Be off, then!"—and it may be that the promptitude with which her orders were obeyed caused her to plume herself rather more than she was justified in doing upon her diplomatic skill.

Those who have had occasion to study the species of diplomacy wherein women strive to excel,

and generally do excel, must have been struck by the unvarying simplicity of its methods. Year after year and generation after generation the same old story is repeated over and over again. In politics, as upon the domestic hearth, feminine will or caprice —given certain conditions—triumphs gaily over such trifling obstacles as argument, reason, and common sense; in the absence of those conditions man remains invincible and the lady powerless. It was because her father's character had no soft side—or, at all events, because she thought it had none—that Cuckoo was forced to acknowledge him her master; and this saddened her, not so much on account of her objection in the abstract to own a master as by reason of her very natural desire to feel that she could occasionally coax or wheedle a concession out of him. The late Mrs. Pennant, had she lived long enough to admonish a younger generation, could have told her what a hopeless ambition that was. James, so far as in him lay, was just to everybody and substantially indulgent to those whom he loved; he had strong convictions respecting the measures of liberty to which every human creature is entitled —conditions to which he had given effect in Cuckoo's case by allowing her to go very much her own way while he went his, and asking for no confidences, save such as she might see fit to repose in him. But the moment that you found yourself in opposition to his ideas of what was right and fitting you might as well attempt to brush aside a brick wall with a walking stick as essay cajolery with him. Once or twice Cuckoo had been signally

worsted in such trials of respective strength. No hard words had been spoken on these occasions, nor had the surrender of her wishes been in itself a matter of great importance to her; yet she had been made to feel that she was a mere cipher, that she counted for just as much or as little as a more powerful personality was pleased to permit, and that is what no daughter of Eve has ever liked to feel since the world began.

Consequently, it was not without forebodings of probable failure that she made, after dinner one evening, a request which certainly sounded, upon the face of it, a trifle audacious.

"Father, would you mind my going to the Grand National with Mr. Carew? I want awfully to see the race!"

"You mean, of course, with Mr. and Mrs. Carew?" said James interrogatively.

But that, it appeared, was just what Cuckoo did not mean. To travel all the way to Liverpool and back in one day was more than Mrs. Carew's strength could be expected to stand; but she was willing, not to say anxious, that her younger and more robust friend should undertake this fatiguing expedition under her husband's escort.

"She thinks," Cuckoo explained, "that he is quite old enough to rank as a chaperon, and she hoped you would agree."

"I am sorry to disappoint her and you," James replied, "but I can't agree. What I have heard about this man Carew—and I have heard a good deal about him lately from Fitzroy and others—

does not lead me to believe that he is in any way the equivalent of a matron. In fact, I meant to have said to you that I would rather you saw a little less of him for the future."

"Fitzroy," observed Cuckoo, the colour mounting into her cheeks, "is much too fond of meddling with what does not concern him."

"I shouldn't have said so; he seems to me to be a very unassuming, unobtrusive young fellow. But, in any case, what you ask for is out of the question; I can't allow it. Have you really become bitten with a love for the turf, Cuckoo, or is it only infection?"

Cuckoo answered that she really did love racing for its own sake. She had learned a little about it of late, and was beginning to understand what patience, science, and art are needed to bring a horse fit to the post and then ride him in such a manner as to get all that there is in him out of him. In all the world, she thought, there could be no pastime quite so exciting.

"Well, yes," her father admitted, "if you look at it in the right way it is a fine sport. One has no right to decry the turf as an institution because most of the men who go racing hardly know a horse's head from his tail, or because so many of them are thieves. Provided that you don't bet, I haven't a word to say against your enjoying yourself on race courses. Only it would not do for you to be seen at Aintree, or anywhere else, with Mr. Carew and without a duenna." He added presently, smiling, "We will make a compromise. Like your friend Mrs. Carew, I really don't feel equal to that double

journey between sunrise and sunset, but I can manage, I believe, to absent myself from the House for a couple of nights, and I have never seen a Grand National run. May I offer my company as a humble substitute for that of the quite impossible sportsman?"

"But you would hate it; it would bore you to death!" objected Cuckoo.

He declared—truthfully, too—that it would have no such effect. There was nothing that he desired more ardently than to be Cuckoo's friend and comrade, and since there were few things that she desired more ardently than to become his, the difficulty of gratifying their respective ambitions should not, it may be thought, have been found insuperable. Unluckily, one of them was hampered by a profound self-distrust and a constitutional dread of thrusting himself where he was not wanted; while the other could overcome neither her fear of her father's uncompromising rectitude (she had not the courage, for instance, to confess that she did occasionally bet) nor her conviction that he did not really care a straw for anything except the political warfare which he evidently deemed her incompetent to discuss.

However, they started off on that pilgrimage to Liverpool together, and in the paddock Miss Cuckoo discovered that the Right Honourable gentleman did, after all, know something about a horse. Not very much, perhaps, still enough to enable him to point out why the favourite, with 12 stone 3 on his back, was being asked to achieve more than could reasonably be expected of him. Now Cuckoo, urged thereto by

the confident representations of Harry Carew, had, some time previously, intrusted this magnificent animal with no less a sum than a hundred pounds at 3 to 1—the best price then obtainable—and after hearing what her father had to say, as well as what the bookmakers were now vociferously offering, she began to wish with all her heart that she had not been such a goose. James made her a liberal allowance, but her expenditure since she had been in London had also been conducted upon a very liberal scale, and she had not a hundred pounds, nor anything like it, in the jewel case which contained her assets. Worse than that, she had several unpaid bills, which she hoped to defray by the aid of what she had been assured was an absolute certainty.

Harry Carew, who strolled up while she was disconsolately meditating upon the uncertainty which besets all human and equine performances, raised her drooping spirits by the promptitude with which he declared that all was going to be well. The favourite simply couldn't lose, he said, and his backers need not feel at all uneasy about the unfounded rumours which had sent him down a few points in the betting.

"For my own part, I haven't hedged a shilling, and I shouldn't advise——"

Cuckoo was obliged to stop him by raising her finger to her lips and glancing meaningly at her father, who was talking to an acquaintance and whose back chanced to be turned at the moment.

She was a little ashamed of that tacit confession of duplicity; but Harry, nodding slightly, seemed to

take it quite as a matter of course. He resumed, in a louder tone of voice, for Mr. Pennant's benefit:

"You, who are only here for the fun of the thing, naturally want the best horse to win. Unrighteous gamblers like me can't always afford to wish for that, but on this occasion I do."

James, turning round to see who the unrighteous gambler might be, was at first rather frigid in his demeanour, although he made a point of saying how much indebted he felt to Mr. and Mrs. Carew for their kindness to his daughter, but Harry soon thawed him into cordiality. Nobody—not even the somewhat numerous persons who had good reason to regret having ever befriended that unscrupulous fellow—could hold out long against his invincible good humour—a good humour which suffered no apparent diminution when the favourite blundered on to his nose at the second fence, thereby disposing of his chances. The horse, being a game one, was remounted and persevered with; but he just failed in the sequel to secure a place; so that Harry, who had backed him "both ways," must have foreseen an extremely disagreeable interview with the lady upon whom he depended for financial support at times of evil fortune. But his only remark was:

"Dear me! what a pity! The weights were right enough, you see, and but for that unlucky mistake in the first few furlongs I should have been three thousand to the good. Well, it's the fortune of war!"

Cuckoo did not find herself able to face calamity in so philosophic a spirit. "What am I to do?"

she asked in an agitated whisper of her confederate, who, as soon as the chief event of the day had been decided, announced that he was going back to London. "I am afraid that I haven't nearly enough money to pay what I owe."

"Oh, I'll settle; don't worry about that," he answered reassuringly. "Sorry my tip didn't come off, but we must hope for better luck next time. Don't say a word to your governor, whatever you do; one can see by the look of him that he would be capable of ordering you to eschew all race meetings for the future."

"I rather like your Harry Carew, do you know," James subsequently remarked. "There is a devil-may-care pluck about men of his stamp which covers a multitude of sins. If he stood to win £3,000 it is easy to calculate what he must have lost, and he made no ugly faces over it. At the same time, I must own that if you were my son instead of being my daughter I should be a little afraid of him. Fortunately, there is no danger of his persuading you to back winners or losers."

"Oh, no!" agreed Cuckoo faintly.

Her father suddenly brought a pair of piercing eyes to bear upon her. "*Have* you ever backed a horse?" he inquired.

And then, alas! she replied—being terrified—with a direct, uncompromising lie. She did not tell it nearly as well as she had told that first childish one, which had been forgiven, though perhaps not forgotten, and James, after a pause, persisted, "Upon your honour?"

"Upon my honour," she echoed, with the decision of despair.

That satisfied her father, who turned a knife round in her heart by observing: "I shouldn't have been very much horrified if you had. It's a bad habit and it doesn't pay, but nine people out of ten have to learn wisdom before they can resist the temptation to indulge in it. However, I am glad it hasn't laid hold of you yet, and I trust you to let me know if it ever does."

CHAPTER X.

BLACK DESPAIR.

The disinterested spectator is often inclined to wonder why high political personages should be so eager for office, since it must surely be a great deal more pleasant to watch and criticise harassed responsibility from the Opposition side of the House than to bear upon one's own poor shoulders the burden of making the best of things. It is asserted, to be sure, by the ignoble, that official salaries and official patronage have something to do with this keen anxiety; but when one considers the inadequacy of the former and the endless botherations which are inseparable from the latter, it seems more reasonable to believe that the party out of power longs to dispossess the party in power merely on account of profound conviction that it could manage the country's business so very much better than its opponents. James Pennant was rich enough to snap his finger at the few extra thousands a year, and modest enough to own that he himself was liable to error; yet he could not carry humility quite so far as to doubt that the Radicals were tampering with the honour and welfare of the empire, nor—more especially—did it seem to him open to question that

the minister who was at that time answerable for the conduct of colonial affairs was unworthy of the confidence nominally reposed in him by Parliament and the nation. It was thus his palpable duty to vex and harry that minister, or rather the undersecretary, who sat in the Lower House, upon every available opportunity, and stress of public duty may have diverted his attention from matters of domestic interest when Cuckoo and he returned from their sporting excursion.

At any rate, he did not appear to suspect that anything was amiss—still less that his daughter had, in a moment of senseless panic, forfeited all claim upon his esteem. He was, in fact, very little at home, and when there could spare no more time from the study of Blue Books than was required for the hasty swallowing of meals. If he did find time, one afternoon, to call upon an old friend in Berkeley Square, it was not with any idea of demanding from her an account of the stewardship which she had somewhat rashly undertaken, but simply because he knew what an intelligent interest Jane Wardlaw felt in contemporary politics. And the truth is that Lady Wardlaw heaved a sigh of relief as soon as this was made evident to her, for she had half expected to be assailed with reproaches which she was conscious of having in some degree earned.

"Oh, it is utterly monstrous and disgraceful!" she agreed after her visitor had expressed himself forcibly with regard to the political situation; "one's only comfort is that these people are digging their

own graves, and that, when once we have got rid of them, it will be a long time before they get another lease."

"There is not much comfort," said James, "in the thought that we shall have to wait for a disaster to get rid of them. As far as home measures are concerned, they still have the country at their backs, and the average elector, not to say the average M. P., is too dull and too indifferent to realize the catastrophe that Lord Rochdale is preparing for us."

He alluded to a dispute which had arisen between the mother country and one of our most important colonies; a dispute so delicate and intricate in its nature, and so deplorably mismanaged by the home authorities, that nothing less than the ultimate loss of the colony seemed likely to prove the reward of incapacity.

"What a scandal it is," exclaimed Lady Wardlaw indignantly, "that a notorious old duffer like Lord Rochdale should be able to force himself upon any Radical ministry! We don't employ such men on our side."

"H'm! well, we may be thankful, at all events, that we couldn't if we would; for we don't happen to have any men on our side who are at once so feeble, so obstinate, and so wrongheaded. He deserves to be impeached."

"How you detest him!"

"I certainly do detest him as a statesman. In private life he may, for anything that I know to the contrary, be no worse than his neighbours, though his manner is not ingratiating."

"Nobody who is acquainted with the Rochdales," Lady Wardlaw declared, "would have the face to breathe one word in his favour. Unless, perhaps, that he is just a shade less offensive than his wife."

"Fitzroy, I imagine, might find a word or two to say in favour of the family," observed James, smiling.

"Are you—er—disappointed about Fitzroy, James?" Lady Wardlaw asked, almost timidly. "It isn't my fault, you know."

"Disappointed? Well, a little bit, perhaps. So far, that is, as one can be said to be disappointed when a desirable event, upon which one had never dreamt of counting, fails to come off. But pray don't imagine that I feel myself in the least aggrieved by the Rochdales—much less by you, to whom both Cuckoo and I owe a deep debt of gratitude."

"It is kind of you to say so, and of course there are as good fish in the water as ever came out of it. Fitzroy Pennant, after all, can't quite take rank as a thirty-six-pounder. Still, the fact remains that I did introduce Cuckoo to the Carews—and I rather wish I hadn't."

James raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?" he inquired.

What Lady Wardlaw meant was that she was beginning to be slightly alarmed, and that she would like somebody who had more influence and authority over Cuckoo than she could boast of to take alarm also. Otherwise she would not have introduced a subject which it would have been pleasanter to avoid. She shrank, however, from putting the case in such plain language as that, and only replied:

"Poor Harry has the worst of bad names; I was afraid you might not be very well pleased with me for having helped to bring about this unexpected intimacy. Naturally, I didn't in the least expect any intimacy at all to follow, and I still hope that no harm will come of it."

"I don't see what harm is likely to come of it," James said. "Mrs. Carew, from all that I hear, is an entirely harmless person, and although her husband might not, I dare say, be a very well-chosen companion for a young man, he can hardly teach a girl bad habits. He has taught her to take an interest in racing, but as he hasn't taught her to bet I don't object to that. The more interests she has in life, the happier she will be."

Lady Wardlaw made a little impatient gesture and drew in her breath quickly, as if she wanted to say something. What she did, after a pause for reflection, decide to say was: "There are people with daughters and people with young wives who even now think it prudent to decline Harry Carew's acquaintance. One didn't feel quite certain that you might not be one of them."

James protested, with a laugh, that he was not so straitlaced as that. "I don't believe in the conventional system, and if I did I couldn't apply it to Cuckoo, who will have to rub shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men on her way through the world. She brings, as far as I can judge, a tolerably keen and clear faculty of discernment to bear upon her fellow-creatures, so that she will soon learn what this or that individual among them is worth. For

my own part, I confess to a sneaking affection for scapegraces of the Carew type. Their faults usually lie upon the surface and their virtues beneath it."

Lady Wardlaw was of opinion that any one who set to work to unearth Harry Carew's virtues would find extensive excavations necessary, but she did not insist. It was evident that her cousin could not, or would not, take a hint, and more than a hint she was not as yet prepared to offer. She changed the subject by remarking:

"I suppose you will be too busy to look in at Retford House to-night and hear Cuckoo play."

"No, indeed," answered James; "I have made arrangements which will enable me, for once, to attend the performance. In fact, the family will be well represented, for we are to dine with the Arthur Pennants and go on afterward in a body. I only wish I were musical enough to appreciate the triumph which William tells me that Cuckoo is sure of achieving. As it is, I shall probably only be able to appreciate her audacity."

It was, no doubt, a trifle audacious for so young a performer to contemplate appearing before a large assemblage at the Charity Concert which (by kind permission of the Duke and Duchess of Retford) was to take place in Park Lane that evening; but Cuckoo had never in her life been troubled with *mauvaise honte.* She knew that she was perfectly capable of doing what she had undertaken to do, it was practically impossible for her to break down, and the mere fact of her audience being numerous, in-

stead of small, inspired her with no terror. Ah, if the evening had had no more terrible experience than that in store for her! But something infinitely worse was to precede it—something which she had set her teeth and nerved herself to go through, as we all—whether heroes or poltroons—must needs do when the fatal hour strikes and the inevitable stands face to face with us.

Therefore it was a pale and perturbed little person whom James found waiting for him in his so-called study when he returned to Ennismore Gardens from Berkeley Square. Cuckoo so rarely entered that room, and her agitation was so manifest, that he at once inquired what was the matter. Was it the cook or the butler who had been discovered in a state of helpless intoxication?

Cuckoo shook her head. "It is worse—*much* worse—than that," she answered. "If every servant in the house were drunk and incapable things wouldn't be half as bad as they are. Now are you prepared? But no! nothing that I can say will prepare you in the least, and I don't know how to begin! Yet there is no escape; you *must* be told!"

The heart of the Right Honourable James Pennant stood still, though his countenance betrayed no emotion. There swept over him a sudden shuddering reminiscence of bygone years, when, upon more than one occasion, an exordium couched in somewhat similar terms to these had proved the prelude to confessions which had made him wish himself dead. But a moment's reflection convinced him

of the absurdity and irrelevance of such associations. It was inconceivable, and indeed impossible, that Cuckoo could have trodden in poor Ada's footsteps, or that he could again be called upon to undergo the humiliating experiences which lay buried in the half-forgotten, wholly forgiven past.

"Well, if I must be told," he said, smiling, "the sooner I am told the better. Sit down and let us hear all about it. So long as it is nothing disgraceful——"

"But it is!" interrupted the girl abruptly.

"What I meant to say was that, so long as you yourself have done nothing disgraceful——"

"But I have!"

There was a pause, during which James sat down in his writing chair, which turned upon a pivot. Wheeling round, so as to bring his back toward the light, he crossed his legs, folded his hands, and waited for further elucidations. Cuckoo, who had not availed herself of his invitation to be seated, thought that she had never seen any one look so calmly, coldly implacable. He might have given her a helping hand, but he evidently did not mean to do so, and, retreat being now out of the question, she took the first plunge with an incoherent rush of words.

"I couldn't go on deceiving you any longer—I dare say you will think that I only speak now because I am forced to speak, but it isn't altogether that—I should have spoken before, and I have often had it on the tip of my tongue; only—only you frighten me so! Besides, I hoped—*j'avais toujours l'idée que*

je finirais par me débrouiller—I did not want to worry you——"

As her father continued to look interrogative, without moving a muscle, she caught her breath despairingly and came at last to the point. "I owe a great deal of money, which I can't pay!"

"Oh, is that it? And what do you call a great deal?" James inquired.

Cuckoo hung her head. "I am afraid it is nearly three hundred pounds," she murmured. "Yes, it is *quite* three hundred pounds—perhaps—almost—as much as three hundred and fifty. There!"

"Are you sure it is not more?"

"I am sure it can not be more. Is not that enough!"

"Well, yes; it is certainly a very large sum for you to have got through in so short a time, and I hardly understand how you can have managed to have spent it. You must have been extravagant to a degree far beyond our means, and if the allowance that I make you is insufficient—as it may very likely be—I wish you had frankly told me so. However, we will look into matters and see what can be done. You have the bills, I presume?"

Cuckoo silently produced from her pocket a sheaf of crumpled documents, for which her father held out his hand. He turned round to his writing table and, taking a pencil and a scrap of paper, rapidly added up the totals.

"A hundred and eighty pounds odd," he remarked presently. "Where are the others?"

"There aren't any others," a tremulous voice re-

plied from behind him. "The rest of the money—the money which I hoped would pay these—went in backing horses that didn't win!"

The murder was out now; he knew all that he could want to know—perhaps even a little more—so it only remained to sink down upon the nearest chair and await judgment. From this she was still separated by some seconds of sickening silence.

"I understood you to tell me, upon your honour," James remarked at length very quietly, "that you had never backed a horse. May I take it that that statement was true at the time when it was made?"

For one moment she had a wild inclination to avail herself of the loophole thus provided for her, but she put it away, with an outward sweep of both hands, remembering the disastrous results of former childish duplicity. "I have been putting a little money on ever since I first began to go racing with Mr. Carew," she answered firmly and almost sullenly. "He has been most unlucky of late, and so have I. As he has paid for me, and as I knew that you would rather I did anything than remain in his debt, I made up my mind to confess."

She was going to add something about the sorrow and remorse which she felt, but the foolish, useless, unmeaning words died away upon her lips. What chance was there of their doing more than deepen the stern disdain with which she was conscious—although she did not look up—of being surveyed?

"I see," said her father presently, "that time has not altered you."

That was really the only reproach which he deemed it necessary or worth while to address to her. He said that, if she would be so good as to let him know the exact sum due to Mr. Carew, it should at once be paid, and he must of course take measures to prevent, as far as possible, any recurrence of such liabilities. As for the bills owing to milliners and others, they also would be defrayed, and he would ask her for the future to keep her expenditure within the limits that a man who was neither rich nor poor could afford. Apparently he had no further request or command to formulate, so that at last Cuckoo was fain to falter out:

"I hope you won't quarrel with Mr. Carew; it was no fault of his."

"I am not a quarrelsome person," James replied. "I do not myself think that a gentleman would have encouraged a young girl to bet upon the results of races to the extent that you have done, but I shall not say so in writing to your friend. I shall merely mention that this is not to happen again, and he will probably understand me. I find that in dealing with men I can generally manage to make myself understood."

He had likewise found that in dealing with women he had never been able to do anything of the sort. If from that he was led to the conclusion that nine women out of every ten are essentially false, who can blame him? With or against our will we all inevitably judge by personal experience, and his had been a bitter one. His heart was full now of a bitterness so intense that the only

thing to be done with it, by his way of thinking, was to devour it silently and stoically. Cuckoo, being a woman, was what she was; there was no more to be said to any purpose. At the end of another minute or so he was moved to compassion by the sight of her pallor and her heavy, tearless eyelids.

"Ought we not to go and dress for dinner?" he asked, in a rather gentler voice.

Cuckoo rose obediently, but stood, hesitating, for an instant. Then, stretching out a timid hand, she just touched him on the sleeve and began, "Father!——"

James drew back. "Oh, I think we won't make a scene about it," he said. "You have spent more than you ought to have done, and you have tried, by about the most foolish method that you could have adopted, to make your accounts square. I have no doubt that this failure will be a lesson to you."

"It will indeed!" she eagerly assured him; "I shall never have another bet as long as I live! But—but that is not all, is it?"

"Well, no," James agreed, "that is not all."

But he evidently could not say, and did not mean to say, that he forgave her for having pledged her honour to a lie; so she turned to leave him, with slow, dragging steps, hoping against hope that he would recall her before she reached the door. However, she was suffered to depart, and as she mounted the staircase nothing seemed to her more certain than that she had, this time, finally and irrevocably lost her father's love as well as his respect.

CHAPTER XI.

CUCKOO DIVERTS HER AUDIENCE.

THE woman, young or old, who has reached the point of not caring an atom whether she is well or ill dressed must either be a most eccentric specimen of her sex or an exceedingly unhappy one, and Cuckoo's recent unbounded prodigality had been in large measure due to the fact that she possessed, and was aware of possessing, perfect taste in the matter of attire. This had led her to employ the most renowned and most extortionate *coutourières*, for she had felt that no inferior artist could adequately carry out her conceptions. Yet, when she reached her bedroom, she did not so much as cast a glance at the lovely costume which lay spread out waiting for her; nor had she a word to bestow upon Budgett, who was also waiting for her, and had been waiting some time.

Budgett, always tenacious of her rights, felt that something in the shape of an apology was due to her, therefore she snorted aloud. "Well," she began, "you *are* late! If you expect me to get your hair done as it should be in less than half an hour, you expect what you won't have, that's all I can say!

What ever have you been about in your pa's study all this time?"

"Oh, don't bother!" was Cuckoo's discourteous reply.

Budgett, who was really attached to her young mistress, and who perceived that the latter was unhappy as well as cross, might perhaps have submitted to this snub had she not, unfortunately, been the most inquisitive of mortals; but, being thus afflicted with the malady of her sex in an acute form, it was altogether impossible for her to hold her peace. A stormy interview had evidently taken place between Mr. Pennant and his daughter, and that its causes and results should be kept secret was more than a self-respecting woman who had for so many years held a post of responsibility could endure. She accordingly proceeded to put question after question, and in default of reply to make suggestions which were not wanting in plausibility until Cuckoo, fairly out of patience, turned upon her with:

"Budgett, will you be good enough to mind your own business?—which is to arrange my hair, not to pluck whole tufts of it out by the roots, while you try to discover whether I have exceeded my allowance or not."

"I *know* you have, my dear," Budgett loftily returned; "you can't deceive me in a matter of that kind. And remembering, as I do, what trouble there was long ago with your poor, dear——"

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted Cuckoo.

Budgett immediately laid down the brushes of

office and took two steps backward, with the air of a tragedy queen. "This to me!" she ejaculated.

"Yes; if you choose to take such liberties, you must expect to be reminded of your proper place."

"My proper place!" echoed Budgett, with tears of fury in her eyes—"you, whom I have took care of, as I may say, from your cradle, to tell *me* what my proper place is! Well, Miss Pennant, we shall see what your father thinks of your language. For without you beg my pardon this minute straight to him do I go, and my duty it will be to let him know how I have been insulted!"

"You may go where you please and say what you like, so long as you leave the room," returned the equally incensed Cuckoo. "I certainly shall not beg your pardon."

Budgett, without more ado, flounced out of the room, slamming the door behind her, and it became necessary to summon the head housemaid to act as her substitute. The head housemaid proved clumsy and inefficient, so that much delay ensued, and Miss Pennant's toilet was completed with more haste than skill. However, that afforded all the more time for the badgering and baiting of the Right Honourable gentleman downstairs. Somebody must needs suffer when revolutionary forces break loose, and the first victims—as indeed is only right and just—are usually found at headquarters.

James, who had dressed quickly, was seated in his study examing papers with wearied, worried eyes, when outraged fidelity in the person of Budgett invaded his solitude.

"What do you want?" he asked resignedly.

He knew pretty well—not being at his first experience of these invasions—what she was going to say, and he also knew that no power on earth would restrain her from saying it. So he pushed the documents which he had been perusing into a drawer, folded his hands, and listened as patiently as if he had been on the Treasury bench receiving the onslaught of some captious Opposition orator.

Budgett's oration was very much what he had anticipated that it would be. She was sorry to trouble him, but she really must ask him to speak to Miss Cuckoo. "Which the words she has used to me this evening I can not put up with, and I do feel, sir, as I didn't ought to remain any longer in my situation if this is allowed to go on."

James Pennant never lost his temper, but upon this occasion he was less disposed than usual to endure gratuitous molestation, and when he had heard the complainant out, he remarked rather dryly:

"It appears that you have been told to hold your tongue. That, I admit, is not a polite injunction, but I do not gather that it was unprovoked, nor am I prepared to interfere between you and Miss Pennant every time that a disagreement of this sort occurs. In short, Budgett, if you are not satisfied with your situation you had better leave it."

Not having the remotest intention of leaving, Budgett drew herself up and replied that she would think it over.

"Very well; only you must understand, please, that when you threaten to give warning, you are

in some danger of being taken at your word. You have been a good many years in my service, and in recognition of the fact I allow you some latitude, besides paying you high wages, but you can not be permitted to dictate either to me or to your mistress. If you are a sensible woman, you will not presume too far upon my patience."

Although Budgett was anything but a sensible woman, she knew Mr. Pennant well enough to be aware that what he said he meant, so she contrived to swallow down the voluble protest against Cuckoo's being spoken of as her mistress which rose to her lips and went near to choking her. Moreover, she was rescued from temptation by the entrance of the butler, who now came in to announce that the carriage was at the door and that Miss Pennant was waiting in the hall.

"I am afraid," said James to his companion, while they were being driven rapidly toward their destination, "that we may have to part with Budgett; her impertinence is becoming intolerable. She forgets—not unnaturally, I dare say—that you are no longer a child, and that she is now more your servant than mine."

"She told me that she meant to complain to you," Cuckoo observed.

"Yes, and I hope she will not do so any more, for it is out of my power to compose squabbles between mistress and maid. If you wish to retain her services, you might give her a hint to that effect. For my own part, I doubt whether she will ever become reconciled to the necessary change in her

position, and I should not be sorry to see her established elsewhere. But act as you think best in the matter."

He spoke as though a certain tragic conversation had passed clean away from his memory, leaving no scars behind. Possibly he did not mean to intimate that Cuckoo might for the future act as she pleased with reference to all matters, as long as she abstained from annoying one who despised her too heartily to view her proceedings otherwise than with indifference, but that was what she took him to imply. And it is needless to add that a severer mode of punishment would have been infinitely more welcome to her. However, since he did not care, and since he had neither pardon nor pity to bestow upon her, why should she not pay him out in his own coin?

"I don't want Budgett to leave," said she. "I was cross and I spoke rudely to her, but it really wasn't worth while to be cross. Very few things are worth being cross about, are they?"

In order to prove the sincerity of her philosophy, she displayed a flow of exuberant spirits when they arrived—very much behind their time—at the house of their relatives, and was the life and soul of the small family dinner party which followed. Cuckoo's gift of unexaggerated mimicry was most amusing, and she now saw fit to exercise it for the benefit of her aunt and cousins, at the expense of divers common acquaintances of theirs, so that the meal was to all outward appearance a merry one. Mrs. Arthur Pennant laughed till the tears rolled down

her cheeks, and Gwen and Ella followed suit. Only James remained wonderingly grave, while Fitzroy's hilarity might have struck a close observer as being just a trifle forced.

Fitzroy, indeed, had divined—how is one to account for the divinations and unexpected sympathies of avowedly stupid persons?—that his cousin's gaiety was less spontaneous than it affected to be, and after dinner he made so bold as to ask her point-blank what was wrong with her. "Because it's as plain as the nose upon your face that there's *something* wrong," he added, by way of explaining his query.

"Nervousness," she replied at once. "Do you think I can seat myself at the piano upon a public platform, as I shall have to do presently, without making frantic exertions to screw up my courage in advance?"

"I am quite sure you can; I doubt whether you know what nervousness means, and I don't believe you have been giving a thought to the concert all this time. What you were trying to do was to make Uncle James writhe—and you succeeded."

"You think so? Well—and afterward?"

"I wouldn't, if I were you, that's all," said Fitzroy. "What is the use? The chances are that if you and he have fallen out, he has been in the right, and hurting his feelings won't put him in the wrong, you know."

"Why should you think that I want to put him in the wrong? Isn't it a good deal more likely that I want to show him how little I myself mind being in the wrong?"

"Yes, perhaps. It's about that fellow Carew, I suppose."

"You have no reason to suppose so that I know of; but if it were? I assure you that I am not in the least ashamed of being a friend of Mr. Carew's."

Fitzroy looked distressed. "Don't be so foolish and obstinate, Cuckoo," he entreated; "you will only end by getting yourself into trouble. I won't offend you a second time by abusing the man, but at least you'll allow that his friendship, whatever it may be worth, isn't worth a quarrel with your father. Of course you know Uncle James a great deal better than I do, but he strikes me as being the sort of person who doesn't quarrel easily, and when he does very seldom makes it up again."

"Ah, and does it strike you that he has quarrelled with me now?"

"Well, you never once looked at him during dinner, I noticed. If you had, you would have seen that he is taking things hard. Come, now, Cuckoo—*is* it worth while?"

The girl glanced at her mentor, whose kindly, comely face was not very far distant from hers, and whose honest anxiety and affection she could not doubt. For a moment she was more than half inclined to make a clean breast of her troubles to him, and had she yielded to that salutary impulse it is by no means improbable that she would have been spared much subsequent misery. But it was not to be. His mother came bustling up to say that there was no time to be lost, and presently, while on the way to Retford House, that well-meaning lady

proceeded to spoil everything by confidentially advising her niece to drop Harry Carew.

"I hate being interfered with myself, and I try not to meddle in other people's business more than I can help, but it's only fair to let you know that people are beginning to talk. Fitz has been fussing about things which he has heard through his friends the Rochdales—who are no friends to your father, by the way—and I don't suppose you know how much harm may be done to a girl by gossip of that kind. I remember Harry Carew as a good fellow in his way and a fine rider across country, but he is no use now for that or any other purpose, and, after the games that he has carried on under her nose, his wife hardly counts as a chaperon. Be advised by me, and have no more to do with him."

It was doubtless perverse and ridiculous of Cuckoo to conclude from this that Fitzroy's solicitude on her behalf was due to his fear of losing caste in the eyes of Lady Rochdale and Lady Elizabeth Tufnell; but such was the conclusion that she formed, and the unfortunate effect of it was to make her nobly decide that she would stand by her friends. Her father might, if he chose, order her to cut them, but he had not done so yet, and until he did she would not be scared away from them either by calumny or by counsels of worldly prudence.

Meanwhile it behooved her to concentrate her attention upon the task immediately before her, and this she was able to contemplate without a touch of that sinking apprehension which is apt to paralyze the fingers of less self-confident performers. She

had undertaken to tackle a couple of Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques*—not too easy, yet quite manageable, seeing that she knew every note of them by heart and had long ago been taught how to play them by the most exacting of instructors. In her second appearance, as interpreter of a somewhat hackneyed prelude by Chopin, she was not less sure of acquitting herself creditably. Still, she was anxious, for several reasons, to earn rather more than that meed of approval which must needs be accorded by no matter how stupid an audience to correctness, combined with brilliancy; so, when the moment came for her to advance to the front of the platform, she felt quite in the mood to astonish the appreciative.

And, as a matter of fact, she did astonish Sir William and Lady Wardlaw, who, it is to be feared, were almost the only true *cognoscenti* present. The former applauded rapturously, both with hands and tongue. It was a sin and a shame, he declared, that people who had only paid a paltry guinea for their seats should be given such a treat as that, sandwiched in between a rubbishy ballad and a solo on the fiddle by a notoriously incompetent amateur. He plunged across the room to congratulate James, who received his compliments submissively and without apparent emotion; he proclaimed for the benefit of all who heard him that Miss Pennant could give "pounds and a beating" to any professional pianist—bar one, or perhaps two—at that time to be found in London.

Well, Sir William was of course an authority, and it was safe to follow his lead; so the young lady achieved what might very well be described as a

triumph. If it failed to satisfy her, that was only because she was conscious of having failed in her object. From her elevated position she could survey at her ease row after row of upturned faces, and these, with the solitary exception of Sir William Wardlaw's, did not wear the expression—or rather the various expressions—which she had wished them to wear. Her father, pale, stern, and melancholy, seemed to be thinking about matters with which concerts had no conection; Fitzroy, seated beside Lady Elizabeth Tufnell, was clapping a large pair of hands perfunctorily, without ceasing to gaze at his neighbour, while Harry Carew, far away in the background, was only too obviously upon the brink of slumber. It was evident that neither Schumann nor Miss Cuckoo could say very much to these self-engrossed persons.

However, she did rather better with Chopin. So admirable was her rendering of *Opus* 28, No. 15, by that composer that the demand for its repetition was not to be ignored, and when, after some delay, she was led back to the instrument, Cuckoo perceived that her opportunity had come. The silence which ensued was broken suddenly by her clear voice, as she turned toward the audience and smilingly said: "Well, you have heard it done in one way—which is the right way. Now you shall hear something else."

What those startled, attentive ladies and gentlemen heard was a really excellent piece of mimicry; a marvellously exact reproduction of the style and peculiarities of a pianist who was at that time justly

celebrated and to whom they had all listened. They were tickled; they were delighted; they gave vent to their admiration after a fashion much more vociferous than was their habit, and Cuckoo, bowing her acknowledgments, said to herself: "*Ca y est!*"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw what an impression she had produced upon Fitzroy; also she saw that her father, frowning slightly and looking puzzled, had risen to cross the room toward the chairs where the Wardlaws were seated.

"He doesn't understand," she thought to herself; "but they will tell him, and it will make him wince."

They did tell him, and he did wince—if there was any satisfaction to be got out of that. She had shown Fitzroy how infinitely cleverer she was than Lady Elizabeth—if there was any satisfaction to be got out of that. But, as she had already inflicted about as much pain upon poor James as she had it in her power to inflict, and as Fitzroy had never for a moment doubted her surpassing cleverness, this success was perhaps, after all, scarcely worth the display of bad taste by which it had been won.

That she had been guilty of extremely bad taste was the decided opinion of Lady Wardlaw, whom she presently descended into the auditorium to join and who said, with visible annoyance: "Your father asked us to take care of you for the rest of the evening. He has to go down to the House, it seems, and I don't think he is particularly fond of music-hall exhibitions."

Sir William shook his head and wagged a reproving forefinger at her. "Oh, you little villain!"

he exclaimed. "Uncommonly well done, I grant you; but——"

"But that sort of thing *isn't* done," struck in Lady Wardlaw with unwonted asperity, "and you ought to know it! No girl of your age can afford to be so impertinent or so—so——"

"So funny?" suggested her husband.

"That wasn't quite the word that I wanted, thank you; still, as a matter of fact, one didn't consent to Cuckoo's taking part in a serious concert in order that she might show how funny she could be. This, I can foresee, will take some living down."

"But I did amuse the company," pleaded Cuckoo demurely, "and, poor things, they looked as if they wanted a little amusement so very badly!"

She had, at all events, succeeded in amusing one of the company, who hastened to tell her so, although he confessed in the same breath that he had never heard, nor even until five minutes ago heard of, the subject of her satire.

"You were splendid!" declared Harry Carew, as he took possession of a vacant chair behind her; "everybody says you were splendid. What spirits you have!"

"Why do you say that?" Cuckoo quickly inquired over her shoulder. "What is there to astonish you in my spirits being good?"

He made the reply which she had anticipated and dreaded. "Your governor was so kind as to mention to me before he left that he had posted a letter and a check to my address. I gathered from his extremely polite manner and from the expression of his

speaking countenance that there had been a bit of a rumpus. How on earth did he find out that you and I had been backing wrong uns?"

The obligatory hush during which a lady of mature years announced, in a heartrending falsetto, that her lost love would come back to her no more prevented Cuckoo from entering into explanations, and immediately after the retirement of the vocalist her attention was claimed by Lady Elizabeth Tufnell, who approached, escorted by Fitzroy, to say how immensely Miss Pennant had diverted all their party.

"So extraordinarily clever of you! If one had shut one's eyes, one could have sworn that one was listening to the original. But what a mercy that he wasn't present! It would have been too dreadful for him, poor man! Is his way of playing Chopin really all wrong? I have admired him so much, and I am afraid I shall never be able to admire him again now!"

Lady Elizabeth, who had the name of being a sweet girl, naturally endeavoured to show herself worthy of her reputation. She now wore an innocent, wondering, slightly conscience-stricken air which was highly becoming, and the provoking thing was that Fitzroy evidently thought all the better of her for looking like that.

"I suppose you mean," answered Cuckoo, "that I am a malicious little ape. Quite true; that is exactly what I am."

"That is exactly what you will be called, anyhow," remarked Lady Wardlaw, while Lady Elizabeth drew back, with an inaudible deprecatory mur-

mur. "Come, Cuckoo, unless you hunger after additional compliments we won't wait for the end of the programme."

Cuckoo followed her displeased chaperon toward the door. She certainly did not want any more compliments, nor was she in the mood to respond amiably when Harry Carew, catching her up on the staircase, repeated his unanswered query.

"I told him myself," she said; "there was no help for it. Oh, yes, thanks, I knew you would have been happy to let me remain in your debt, but that was not to be thought of. Well, it won't happen again, for I have made my last bet."

"But that's such an awful mistake! We should have pulled it all back in another week or two, and very likely been several hundreds to the good. Did he exact a solemn promise and vow from you?"

"He exacted nothing at all."

"Not even an undertaking that you would have no more to say to me?" asked Harry rather eagerly.

"Not even that," answered Cuckoo; "my father is not an exacting person."

Something in Harry's face—something which was almost always in Harry's face, and which appealed to the maternal instinct inherent in all women, no matter what their age may be, impelled her to add: "And if he had, I am not sure that I should have obeyed him. My friends are my friends."

CHAPTER XII.

BUDGETT'S DISCOVERY.

It may be remembered that when James Pennant was summoned to accompany his daughter to the dinner at which they were due he left the injured and irate Budgett in his study. He likewise left his keys sticking in the lock of a drawer which contained many documents of importance—a careless thing to do, no doubt, yet not an unnatural one. For who can keep all his wits about him or restrain an overwhelming, undignified impulse to run away when confronted with a scolding woman? James, as we have seen, had demeaned himself with proper dignity and self-assertion, still he had not been sorry to quit the field of battle, nor, even if he had subsequently missed his keys, would he have felt seriously uneasy. Budgett was what she was, but he was quite sufficiently sure of her honesty to leave the cash box which he kept in the top drawer of his writing table within her reach for a few hours.

The degree of confidence would not have been misplaced. The woman, although she was a very long way from being honest, was no thief, and it was not any temptation to enrich herself by petty larceny that caused her eyes to glisten when they fell

upon the half-closed drawer of which the contents lay ready for her inspection. What were those contents? Letters, very likely, from political magnates relating to public affairs, or memoranda for speeches —entirely devoid of interest for man or woman, save for those immediately concerned therewith. On the other hand, they might be—and it was by no means improbable that they were—bills run up by the extravagant Cuckoo, a glimpse at which would be at least instructive and entertaining. That was really all that Budgett had in her mind when, as a mere measure of precaution, she locked the drawer and pocketed the bunch of keys. Somebody —the butler, one of the footmen, or James's valet —might come into the room at any moment, and she owed it to her employer (rude and ungrateful though his conduct had been to her) to protect him against the possible consequences of vulgar curiosity.

Solitude is the inevitable penalty of greatness, and Budgett had seen fit to hold her head so high that she was neither beloved nor very much consorted with by her fellow-servants. She was, however, feared by them on account of its being in her power to tell tales, so that when she betook herself to the housekeeper's room to make certain inquiries, the information which she desired was not withheld from her. As previous remarks which had been made in her presence had led her to anticipate, the butler and the valet were upon the point of starting for the theatre, while one of the footmen had a rather particular appointment to keep with a lady

which would entail his absence from home for a couple of hours at least.

"Well, I'm sure! what next!" exclaimed Budgett, with simulated indignation. "Such goings-on, without leave asked or given, would never be put up with in any well-managed house, nor wouldn't have been, let me tell you, in my own father's establishment, which in the days of our prosperity was fully equal to this one. I really don't know but that I ought to speak about it."

"Miss Budgett," said the butler gravely, "I am sure you are too honourable a lady to do such a thing as that. *Hand*, I may add, too kind-'earted."

"Well, for this once, then, Mr. Barker," answered Budgett, pretending to relent, "we will let it pass. But I can't think it right for only one man to be left to take care of us all while the rest of you are out enjoying yourselves—and him three parts an idiot, as one may say!"

She turned sharply toward the long-legged youth thus unflatteringly described and added:

"Now, Thomas, if you don't take some coals to the study this minute we shall have the fire going out again, and then Susan will have a word or two to say to you. *I* never met with such a lazy, heedless lot—never in all my life before!"

Thomas sulkily departed to do as he was bid, and immediately afterward Budgett announced casually that she was going up to her own room to write letters. She was now, she calculated, safe from interruption for a good hour to come, since Thomas would certainly heap coals halfway up the chimney

to save himself the trouble of a second journey, and it was nobody else's business to enter Mr. Pennant's private room. She really thought that it was more or less her own business to do so. Feminine processes of self-justification are clean beyond the understanding of mortal man; one can but take note of them, with disrespectful wonder, and recognise the practical impossibility of ever convincing any woman of sin.

It was no desire to convince Miss Cuckoo of sin that caused the estimable Budgett to seat herself in her master's chair and unlock the top drawer of his writing table. She merely wanted to find out what was the matter, and the confidence reposed in her, under somewhat similar circumstances, by the late Mrs. Pennant was her reason for believing that such enlightenment would be for the advantage of all parties concerned. She had mediated—or flattered herself that she had—successfully before, and she was ready, notwithstanding recent unworthy slights, to mediate again.

However, the batch of documents, secured by an elastic band, upon which her investigating fingers first fell purported to be of a more interesting character than commonplace accounts rendered.

"Letters and papers relating to C.'s adoption," was the superscription which they bore, and the significance of the concluding word was not lost upon her.

"Adoption!" she ejaculated. "Lord preserve us! what does this mean?"

A letter, written in her former mistress's loose,

flowing hand, and dated some seventeen years back from a town in the south of France, lay before her to answer her question. It may be given here *in extenso* for the information of the reader, since, although completely explicit, it was not very long:

"DEAR JAMES: Since you left for England I have *quite* made up my mind about the baby. You know what I am—I *must* have somebody or something to love, and this dear little thing will help to console me for the loss of much which most people would say that a wife is entitled to expect. Perhaps also she will help, as you pleasantly put it when we last spoke upon the subject, to 'keep me straight.' I am not reproaching you, mind; I don't deny that I have given you cause for complaint; I only say that I am like this, while you are like that, and that you had better, for both our sakes, humour what you call my whim.

"Only the child must be *my very own*. It would not be in the least the same thing to me to call her by her father's name—*such* a name, too!—and admit that I had adopted her out of an orphanage. I could explain why, but as you would not understand, it would hardly be worth while. I have spoken to the Sisters and they assure me that nothing will be more simple; they have already had more than one case of the same kind, and they are prepared to furnish papers which will set the whole matter quite *en règle*. So please do not raise difficulties where, by your own showing, none exist. Of course it would not do for us to pretend to have a son, but

no possible injury can be done to anybody by our allowing ourselves the luxury of a daughter."

The writer wound up by expressing a polite hope that her husband was enjoying himself in London and by requesting an immediate remittance to meet unforeseen various expenses.

Although there was nobody to hear her, Budgett could not resist exclaiming, "Just what I have suspected from the very first!" She had never for one moment suspected anything of the sort, and the deceased lady who, as she had believed, had told her everything, had hoodwinked her with complete success; but that is neither here nor there. The next piece of documentary evidence that came under her notice was the reply, despatched from London, to the above:

"My dear Ada: You are, I am afraid, right in saying that I should not understand any explanations that you might give of your fancy for passing this alien orphan off as our own child. I confess that I see no object in such a piece of deception, and deception of any kind is rather disagreeable to me. To your adopting the baby—since you are so bent upon it—I have already given my consent; and to this, I take it, there can be no objection, legal or other. I will, however, go fully into the matter with the Sisters on my return. It is true that no material injury would be done to my family or my successors by the course which you propose; but it occurs to me, among other things, that the child

herself might, at some future time, have a right to blame us for having concealed the truth from her. Upon the whole, therefore, I must ask you to rest satisfied for the present with the concession that I have made. You are so kind as to say that you do not reproach me. Nor have I any desire to reproach you; but you will perhaps acknowledge that I am justified in doubting whether your wishes of to-day will correspond to your wishes of five, ten, or twenty years hence.

"Affectionately yours,
JAMES PENNANT."

"Nasty, cold-hearted, sneering fellow!" was Budgett's muttered comment. "If the poor lady was no better than she should be in some ways I'm sure I, for one, don't wonder at it!"

Budgett's own heart was probably a warm one, notwithstanding her defective ethical philosophy, and she felt herself at once in sympathy with James's victims—although, to be sure, one of them appeared to have eventually obtained all that she had asked of him. Consequently, there was still some chance that this discovery of a startling family secret would remain unutilized.

"I am not vindictive," mused the discoverer; "that can not be said of me. I could do a deal of mischief, if I had a mind to it; but such is not my way, nor ever has been. Yet to think that I have been trampled upon and ordered to hold my tongue by a mere waif and stray, as one may say, out of a foundling hospital!"

That Cuckoo was not exactly that an examination of the accompanying papers would have proved to any one conversant with the French language, but as most of these were couched in legal phraseology, and as Budgett's years of residence abroad had added but little to her knowledge of foreign tongues, they failed to convey to her more than a vague idea of the facts.

The facts, briefly stated, were that the orphan whom Mrs. Pennant, in a moment of tenderness or caprice, had resolved to appropriate was the sole issue of a runaway marriage. Cuckoo's mother, herself an orphan of good birth but next to no means, had scandalized the society of the province in which she dwelt by eloping with her music master. Perhaps the grudging hospitality of an uncle and aunt, together with the very poor prospect that there was of any eligible husband being discovered for a dowerless maiden, may have led her to take a step which involved prompt and final repudiation on the part of her relatives. At all events, off she went with her musical M. Poisson, and the Baron de Vauvilliers, with Madame la Baronne, his wife, could only wash their aristocratic hands of her. The poor woman seems to have had a hard time of it during her short married life. Poisson, whether he was or was not the genius that she took him for, failed to make a fortune either by his compositions or by giving pianoforte lessons at three francs an hour; despondency and a sharp razor removed him one fine morning from a world which has ever been dilatory in recognising genius, and his widow soon

afterward fell into a condition of health which necessitated unattainable luxuries. In order to prolong, if possible, a life rendered valuable by the circumstance of her having become a mother, she dragged herself down to the southern city where she died—her last moments, it may be hoped, being soothed by the promise of the good Sisters at the neighbouring orphanage that her helpless infant should be provided for. That the helpless infant was destined to be provided for after the magnificent fashion brought about by subsequent events was, of course, more than Madame Poisson or the Sisters could ever, in their most sanguine moments, have foreseen, and it is needless to add that the de Vauvilliers family, on application being made to them, willingly waived any claim they may have possessed upon the custody of a plebeian offshoot. The transfer, therefore, upon which Mrs. Pennant had set her heart, was effected with ease and despatch. Louise-Marie Poisson became Cuckoo Pennant, and every needful formality was duly complied with.

All this was to be gleaned from sundry clerkly folios which Budgett did her best to decipher, and at something like the gist of which she ultimately arrived. Her inclination, as has been said, was to use her power leniently—perhaps not to use it at all. She was fond of Cuckoo if she had no great love for Cuckoo's supposed father, and she did not wish to ruin the poor girl's worldly prospects. Moreover, she personally could have nothing to gain by so doing."

"Well, my dear," she concluded, addressing somebody who was out of earshot, while she replaced

the papers in the drawer from which she had taken them and left James's bunch of keys in the lock, "all must depend upon yourself. Ingratitude I can bear in silence, and have borne, but if you begin talking to me as though I was the dirt beneath your feet—then perhaps I may have to let you know, or remind Mr. Pennant, that at any rate I am not a low-born workhouse brat!"

Even when one has no expectation or intention of shooting anybody there is sometimes a comfortable sense of security in the knowledge that one's pocket contains a loaded revolver, so Budgett quitted her master's study with restored self-respect and an elevated chin. That, in addition to self-respect, she possessed the virtue and blessing of self-control was proved by her bravely resisting a rather strong temptation to return to the housekeeper's room.

"Not to-night," she told herself, conscious of the frailty of her moral nature. "While this is still fresh upon me I might be led into saying something as I should be sorry for afterward."

Sorrow and remorse would, no doubt, have been her speedy portion had she betrayed her young mistress, for the latter, who came home soon after midnight, was discovered to be in no fighting mood.

"Budgie," she began when, in response to her ring, the injured one appeared, "you must forgive me for having been nasty to you before dinner. I don't want to be nasty, only—only things do go so dreadfully askew with me!"

Cuckoo looked pale, tired, and despondent; there were dark semicircles under her eyes, and the lace-

bordered pocket handkerchief which she had thrown down upon her dressing table seemed to have been used for a purpose to which it was but nominally adapted.

"A few more evenings like this and I shall wish that I had never been born!" she exclaimed.

The mollified Budgett hastened to condole and interrogate. It would have been easy and not unnatural to hint oracularly at circumstances connected with the birth of some of us which might well make that event appear a subject for regret, but she refrained from such hints, and also from ungenerous recriminations. All she asked for was a categorical confession.

"What ever have you been doing, my poor dear? You don't mean to say that you have gone and played wrong notes before all those people!"

Cuckoo shook her head. "Oh, no; I played the right notes, and I have been quite successful—only too successful! But, unluckily, the people with whom I succeed are the wrong people."

She was not much more explicit than that, although she did, on being pressed, admit that she had vexed her father by exceeding her allowance. She was badly in want of a confidential comforter, and old association had softened her heart toward the friend in need of childish days, but it would have been quite impossible—even if she had faithfully recounted all the evening's incidents—to make Budgett understand why she had been crying or why she felt so profoundly mortified, humiliated, disgusted with herself. Unpaid bills, therefore, and the consequent displeasure of the head of the family, who had

been informed that he would have to pay them, were made to do duty as the source of her trouble, and Budgett did not hesitate to declare that such small annoyances were no more than every father and husband ought to expect.

"But he doesn't expect to be deceived," observed Cuckoo. "It was because I said nothing to him until I was obliged, not because I had thrown away so much money that he was angry."

"And if you said nothing to him, wasn't it only to spare his feelings?" cried Budgett. "Men never think of that, nor yet they can't see the difference between dresses and coats. What do they know about clothes, with their tailor's bills never varying by so much as a ten-pound note from one year to another!"

Budgett, who had fought Mrs. Pennant's battles of yore—or persuaded herself that she had—was quite exhilarated at the prospect of rendering a similar service to Mrs. Pennant's successor.

"Don't let this worry you, my dear," said she in answer to some further despondent utterances; "just you leave him to me! I'll undertake to bring him to reason in no time!"

Cuckoo had a melancholy little laugh at a vaunt so palpably idle; but then, to be sure, she did not know what magnificent cards Budgett held.

"Oh, you may laugh," was the latter's self-confident retort, "but you will see! I am not one to promise more than I can perform, and I have yet to meet the man who can put me to silence when my mind is made up."

CHAPTER XIII.

PERILOUS SYMPATHIES.

If the bold Budgett did not straightway proceed to prove herself as good as her word, she was actuated, it may be assumed, by much the same motives as sometimes deter prudent generals from attacking a quiescent enemy. Since Mr. Pennant was willing to pay up, what use would there be in wasting powder and shot upon him? A day might come, and probably would come, when reserve stores of ammunition would be called for; meanwhile, it seemed best to maintain an attitude of observation and a lofty resolve to "put up with no nonsense."

Moreover, the most intrepid man or woman may well hesitate to set the house on fire. One does not, under such circumstances, know quite for certain what will happen next, and one has a natural regard for the integrity of one's own person. Of course, if Mr. Pennant could be counted upon to behave like a reasonable being—if, perceiving that he was at his adversary's mercy, he were at once to say: "My good woman, name your own price"—that would be entirely satisfactory. But he was not at all less likely to respond, with frigid malignity, "Do your worst! You have discovered a secret by means

which compel me to discharge you without a character; you will not do yourself much good by divulging it, though you will, no doubt, cause me some pain and annoyance."

These considerations gave Budgett pause, and as it did not occur to James, when he found his keys where he had left them, that anybody could have been investigating his private papers, the outward tranquillity of the establishment remained undisturbed. Inwardly, it is true, the master of the establishment was very far from being at ease. Those same papers, to which he had instinctively turned in the first moment of his distress, represented to him the history of what he had always felt, and had sometimes—long ago—declared to be a great mistake. It is permitted to anybody to adopt an orphan; it is scarcely permissible to introduce that orphan to your friends, and perhaps marry her to one of them under a name which she has no right to bear. But he had yielded, against his better judgment, to the entreaties of his sick, wayward wife, and after her death—well, after her death he had felt that he could not be guilty of the disloyalty which she so evidently apprehended. "James," she had murmured, almost with her last breath, "the child!" And he had answered—too hastily, it might be—with a promise which was absolutely binding upon him.

Nothing was further from his mind than an idea of breaking that promise now. Cuckoo had become to all intents and purposes his own child, and it was not in order to seek consolation for her having dis-

appointed him that he turned to written proof of her having no drop of his blood in her veins. Some vague expectation of chancing upon an allusion to hereditary tendencies was more probably his incentive; but the letters at which he had not glanced for so many years contained nothing of that sort, nor indeed was any such explanation of a very ordinary phenomenon required. Cuckoo might quite conceivably have been his (and his late wife's) daughter, yet have preferred falsehood to truth; that she was somebody's daughter instead of being somebody's son sufficed, after all, to account for everything.

Cuckoo fully expected to be rebuked for the display of bad taste in which she had seen fit to indulge at the concert, but of this humiliation, or satisfaction, she was disappointed. James, when they next met, did not refer to the subject, nor had he anything further to say with regard to other subjects which had brought about a coolness between them. Distantly courteous, much preoccupied, and seldom at leisure (for the Opposition of which he was a formidable member had just then determined to make the lives of ministers a burden to them), he had evidently matters of more importance to think about than the vagaries of an ill-behaved girl, and if he was not wholly indifferent as to what she did or what became of her he had every appearance of being so. Perhaps no other fashion of evincing displeasure was possible to one of his temperament, but that, unhappily, did not prevent it from being the very worst that he could have adopted. Men, when they have been in the wrong, do not, as a

rule, object to being ignored by those who hold authority over them, but to women such treatment is always intolerable, and often provocative of disastrous measures of retaliation.

One evening after dinner Cuckoo dutifully requested permission to accompany the Carews to Hurst Park on the following day. "I should like to go, if you don't object," she said.

"Provided that Mrs. Carew is to be of the party I have no objection," was the reply that she received after a momentary pause.

"It was she who invited me, and—and I shall not back anything," Cuckoo returned.

"Oh, no, you will not bet; at any rate Mr. Carew will not put any money on for you," observed James tranquilly. "Upon that point he and I understand one another, I believe."

He did not, she noticed, request her to bind herself by any self-denying ordinance. The presumption was that he looked upon her word as a worthless security; he had not even suggested that, for her own sake, she would do wisely to have no further dealings with bookmakers. Any measures that might be deemed advisable for her protection were to be taken without her knowledge or assent, it seemed. Did he really imagine, then, that if she wanted to risk money upon the result of a race, prohibitions laid upon Harry Carew would restrain her from so doing?

"I don't know what understanding you may have with Mr. Carew," she remarked presently. "What I meant was that I have given up betting. I shall

never win or lose another shilling on a race-course."

This announcement was acknowledged by a silent inclination of the head and a slight smile which brought the colour into her cheeks. She was vexed with herself for having made it, and something more than vexed with the implacable, indifferent father who would grant her no place for repentance. *"C'ést à ne plus y tenir!"* she inwardly exclaimed, making use of the tongue which came rather more naturally to her than English. Reproaches and restrictions she could have cheerfully endured, conscious of having deserved them, but contemptuous toleration caused her to lay her ears back and show the whites of her eyes. *"Que voulez-vous?"* she said to herself; *"je suis comme ça moi. Du moment que l'on ne m'aime pas, je risque de devenir méchante!"*

Community of sentiment should have enabled Cuckoo to sympathize with Mrs. Carew, whom she found waiting for her in Chesham Place and in a deeply aggrieved mood the next day, but really it was not very easy to pity that injured woman when she complained that Harry was no longer in love with her. In all conscience, what could she expect? If she had bewailed his extravagance, his selfishness, his disregard of all conventional proprieties, she would have been well within her right, but was it not a little bit absurd to accuse him, at that time of day, of having ceased to care for one whose wrongs were a secret to nobody? However, it pleased Mrs. Carew to talk, on that occasion, as though a hitherto affectionate husband had just begun to neglect her,

and as though such conduct on his part were as unaccountable as it was mortifying. Self-deception of that kind—if indeed the poor woman did contrive to deceive herself—was harmless enough, and great allowances were to be made for her; only one is not always, unfortunately, in the frame of mind to make allowances for idiots. Cuckoo, therefore, on the way down to Hurst Park (whither the delinquent had fled in advance) listened with suppressed impatience to the jeremiads of her companion, saying to herself that, after all, two versions may be given of every quarrel.

A quarrel of a somewhat serious nature had, it appeared, taken place that morning between Mr. and Mrs. Carew, and the version of it put forward by the latter scarcely bore the impress of strict veracity. Originating in a pecuniary dispute, it had, according to her, resulted in a heartless and shameless acknowledgment on Harry's part that he was over head and ears in love with somebody whose name did not transpire, and that he wished to Heaven he had never been so insane as to tie himself for life to a shrew. "His own words, I assure you!" the lachrymose Julia asseverated. "Don't you think that, after all the sacrifices I have made for his sake, it is too monstrous of him to say such things?"

Perhaps, but it was so very unlike that easy-going, peace-loving man to have said such things that Cuckoo felt justified in provisionally withholding condemnation.

Harry's account of the affair was imparted to her shortly after the two ladies had reached their des-

tination and had been conducted by him to the seats reserved for them. He wore, in obedience to the decrees of a fugitive fashion, a pair of white ducks and a straw hat tilted on to the back of his head, which costume, combined with his abashed air, gave him even more than usual the appearance of a naughty schoolboy. So anxious, to all outward seeming, was he to re-establish amicable relations with his incensed wife that he sat down meekly beside her, offering her his field glasses, and made no response to Cuckoo's suggestion that they should descend into the paddock until he had mutely requested permission to absent himself. This, however, having been accorded by Mrs. Carew, who had some acquaintances near her, and who, for her part, disliked venturing within the range of the heels of thoroughbreds, he breathed more freely and recovered something of his accustomed jauntiness.

"Oh, yes, a deuce of a row!" said he in answer to the inquiry which Cuckoo addressed to him—"worst row we have had for I don't know how long! I don't mind owning that I lost my temper; somehow or other I let slip things which I oughtn't to have told her, and she riled me by the way she took them. So then I lost my head as well as my temper and the fat was in the fire before one knew where one was! Did she—er—tell you what I said?"

"She told me that you had called her a shrew, and that you had confessed to being in love with somebody else. If that is true, you can't wonder at her being angry."

Harry looked relieved. "Did I really call her

a shrew?" he asked, grinning unrepentantly. "That was atrocious of me, and I won't fail to apologize. As for my being in love—come, now, *does* a man of my age fall in love? And if he did, is it within the bounds of possibility that any woman could fall in love with him? Nobody but Julia would dream of taking a statement like that seriously."

"I think you ought to beg her pardon, anyhow," said Cuckoo.

"All right, but I doubt whether you would think so if you had heard the accusations and the epithets that she flung at me. For good, solid, coarse vituperation an earnest Christian woman in a rage has no equal. And it wasn't as if I had really done anything to deserve such language either. Well, well, let's try to forget it. These disturbances will occur from time to time in the best-regulated families, and ours has never set up to belong to that high class. How about the little disturbance upon your own domestic hearth? Quieting down by this time?"

"It was not noisy at any time," replied Cuckoo with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "I suppose it may be said to have subsided, since I am allowed to be here—and in your company."

"Between you and me, I didn't very much expect that you would be allowed to profit by my improving company any more. Your governor wrote me a rather stiff letter. You shall profit, though, if you like, and if you'll promise to say nothing to him about it, for I can put you on to a real good thing for the City and Suburban."

Cuckoo shook her head. "No, thank you; I

have done with good things—and bad ones, too. I am not much to be depended upon, as my father would tell you, but it is absolutely certain that I shall never make another bet."

"Because he forbids it?"

"No, because I forbade myself. He thought, I believe, that it would be a waste of breath to issue any more orders to the disobedient and deceitful."

"Oh, well, if it's only a question of keeping your own resolutions, let me advise you to break them for this once. It isn't every day, nor every year either, that one gets such a tip as I have at your service now."

Cuckoo raised her eyebrows. Apparently her father's understanding with Harry Carew was less complete and decisive than he supposed.

"That 'stiff letter,' as you call it, hasn't choked you off, then?" she asked.

Harry laughed. Perhaps he was going to reply—as he might truthfully have done—that he was not the man to be choked off by threats, but at that moment Cuckoo's attention was drawn away from him by a couple who, strolling across the inclosure, caught sight of her and paused to accost her. Fitzroy, while shaking hands with his cousin, cast an interrogative and disapproving glance at her straw-hatted companion; Lady Elizabeth Tufnell, beautifully dressed and charmingly pretty, was eager to be informed what was going to win the next race.

"I am sure *you* know all about it, and Mr. Pennant has been taking advantage of my ignorance to lay me ten to one in gloves against the favour-

ite," she said, in explanation of her anxiety. "Has he swindled me?"

"It doesn't look like it, considering that the starting price appears to be two to one on," answered Cuckoo dryly; "but I know no more than you what will win. You had better consult Mr. Carew, who probably does know."

Lady Elizabeth managed, without opening her lips, to convey to her adviser the impression that she would rather not consult the gentleman in question, or even speak to him. She made some remark about the fine weather and the number of people whom it had brought down from London, adding innocently: "I suppose you are with Lady Wardlaw, aren't you?"

"I am, as you see, with Mr. Carew," answered Cuckoo in a loud, distinct voice.

She meant Fitzroy to hear her, and was glad to notice by the cloud which at once overshadowed the young man's brow that he had heard her. Presently he drew nearer—Lady Elizabeth having turned away for a moment to greet one of her numerous friends—and murmured with visible annoyance: "You surely don't mean what you say!"

"That I am here with Mr. Carew? But why shouldn't I mean what is obvious to all who have not been deprived of the blessing of sight? Oh, yes, I am here with Mr. Carew—and you are here with Lady Elizabeth Tufnell."

"That," Fitzroy returned, "is a totally different thing. Lord Rochdale is somewhere about, and Lady Rochdale is in the stand."

"Really? Well, so is Mrs. Carew."

"Oh, Mrs. Carew!"—Fitzroy appeared to hesitate for an instant, but made up his mind to resume: "I wish you would come and join our party."

"Many thanks, only I am not convinced that I should receive an enthusiastic welcome. You will have to abandon me, I am afraid, to the low society which I find so congenial. For the rest, I am authorized. My father knows where I am and who is taking charge of me."

"I doubt very much," returned the young man frowning, "whether he knows what is apt to be said about ladies of whom Carew takes charge. You won't be guided by me, of course, but——"

He was prevented from finishing his sentence by a sudden movement on the part of the throng which forced him to move forward a few paces. The horses were filing out of the paddock, and Harry Carew, catching Cuckoo unceremoniously by the elbow, said: "Come along! We shall have to make a bolt for it if we want to see the race."

So they made a bolt for it, and they saw the race, which was won with very great ease by the favourite; but of Lady Elizabeth and the gentleman who had obliged her with such preposterous odds they saw no more.

"Do you happen to know," Harry Carew inquired of Cuckoo later in the afternoon, "what your young cousin's fighting weight is?"

Cuckoo had no idea. "Do you contemplate fighting him?" she asked.

"No; I am not at all sure that I should care to

tackle him with or without the gloves nowadays. But he looked rather as if he would like to fight me. What is the matter with him?—not jealousy, one presumes."

"Certainly not in the sense that you mean. But he is jealous for the credit of the family, perhaps, and a little afraid of my disgracing it."

"Which accounts for his scowling at me, eh? At that rate he is as unjust as Julia, and considerably less flattering. What is to be done? All I can say is that I am ready to submit without a murmur to your orders—though not to his or to my wife's."

Who but Harry Carew would have thus artlessly let the cat out of the bag? Even when he perceived —as he instantly did—that he had betrayed himself, he was more amused than disconcerted.

"Oh, yes," he made haste to add, "the row was about you. I only wonder that you didn't guess it; and I wonder still more at Julia's having allowed us to be chums for so long without opening fire upon us. But you seem to have pacified her by some means or other."

"I suppose," answered Cuckoo, who had reddened slightly, "that she became pacified when she saw for herself what an insane notion she had taken into her head. You never pretend to be younger than you are, so you won't mind my saying that I entirely agree with you as to the impossibility of a man of your age falling in love with a girl."

"And the far more glaring impossibility of a girl of your age falling in love with a man of mine.

Oh, I have no illusions, I assure you," Harry declared, with an audible sigh.

He had no sort of business to sigh audibly, but really he felt that it would have been almost a breach of common politeness to abstain from paying that conventional tribute to the fascinations of the unattainable. It was at once agreed that a grotesque suspicion required neither notice nor confutation; and although Cuckoo, in spite of what she said, remained a trifle embarrassed, her companion was not in the least so.

"Julia's gift for goading me into indiscretions of word and deed amounts to genius," he presently remarked. "I am a patient, peaceable, resigned sort of mortal; yet every now and then I ask myself whether *anything* wouldn't be better than the kind of life that I am fated to lead. Do you ever feel like that?"

Cuckoo nodded. At the moment when the question was put to her she happened to be feeling very much like that. Deservedly despised by her father, blamed (without having deserved it at all) by certain persons who might have known her better than they appeared to do, she had the sensation of being what, if the whole truth had been revealed to her, she would undoubtedly have pronounced herself—a species of outcast. The man who was leaning over the rails at her elbow resembled her in some respects, she fancied.

"I think we often feel alike, you and I," she said. "Perhaps that is because we aren't either of us good for much."

Harry Carew was good for nothing, or he never would have answered her as he did. But perhaps the habits of a lifetime are more than any of us can withstand at a given moment; perhaps, too, he did not realize the depth of his possible iniquity. In any case, while owning that his wife's instincts had not led her astray, he professed to be fully aware that he was a middle-aged fool.

"I only tell you the fact, which is as absurd as it is real, in order that you may know how absolutely and always I shall be at your command," was his somewhat inadequate excuse. "Don't answer, but don't forget."

Cuckoo did not answer, nor was she destined to forget. If she was vexed and ashamed, it must be acknowledged that she was also a little pleased. After all, there was somebody in the world who, knowing pretty well what her failings were, loved her and asked for nothing in return!

CHAPTER XIV.

WARNING.

To receive a declaration of love from a married man of mature years who does not accompany his confession with any extravagant proposals is to receive no great compliment. Married men of mature years may—it is to be feared that they sometimes do—lose their heads to the extent of offering to desert their wives, and the recipients of their ardent vows may find it possible to pardon, while condemning, them; but what is altogether inexcusable on their part is to proclaim themselves enamoured of a lady for whose sake they do not intend to sacrifice either fortune or social position. Such announcements, the lady may very reasonably assume, are incompatible with the respect which is her due.

Cuckoo, however, did not take that view of Harry Carew's indiscretion. Within the limits imposed upon her by ignorance of the world and its ways, she understood the man; she was quite sure that he had spoken as he had done simply because he could not help himself, and almost sure that he had spoken nothing but the truth. Impulsive and affectionate by temperament, estranged from his wife through faults on both sides, of which his own were perhaps

not the more cogent, it was but natural that he should seek elsewhere what was denied to him at home, and that he did not, in this instance, seek for anything so obviously beyond his reach as reciprocity was surely a point in his favour. The case, therefore, was not one for virtuous indignation. His secret, which in all probability would never be referred to again, was safe with her, and she saw no reason why she should cease to be his friend. On the contrary, she was grateful to him—grateful, as the forlorn and despised must always needs be to a solitary fellow-creature who loves them. It will be observed that Cuckoo had learned and unlearned much since the days of her childish boast to Fitzroy that she could make anybody and everybody love her.

But she had not, unfortunately, learned to dispense in a philosophic spirit with the universal affection which her nature craved, and that may have been one reason for her inability to look pleased when Gwen and Ella Pennant informed her that they were expecting every day to hear of their brother's engagement to Lady Elizabeth Tufnell. It was after a luncheon with her cousins that this piece of news was communicated to her, and she responded by mutely shrugging her shoulders and wrinkling up her nose.

Deprecatory ejaculations were at once raised. Wasn't she glad?—didn't she think it would be a good thing? Lady Elizabeth was such a dear!—so clever, so pretty, so nice in every way! The kindly, homely Pennant girls, conscious that they themselves were devoid of those charms which are commonly supposed to appeal to the other sex, were devoid also

of envy and jealousy, and were quite ready to fall down and worship at the feet of their prospective sister-in-law. Surely Cuckoo had not been set against Lady Elizabeth by Uncle James's persistent attacks upon poor Lord Rochdale's policy! It was no fault of hers that her father happened to be a Liberal.

"Well, at all events, it will prevent one from seeing much of them, I suppose," said Cuckoo, "and I can't help being sorry for that. Because I have always liked Fitzroy, and—and I am afraid I don't see much to like in that conceited, insipid girl. I should have thought he might have done a little better for himself."

Gwen and Ella were of a different opinion. They frankly confessed that they had at one time hoped he might do better—that is, that he might marry somebody to whom they were even more attached than they were to Lady Elizabeth. "But it was easy to see that neither you nor he would ever feel any inclination that way, so there was no use in thinking any more about it. And really she isn't a bit conceited. You wouldn't say so if you knew her better."

"Oh, I dare say she is all right, and I dare say I shall like her when I know her better—if I ever do," answered Cuckoo, not over graciously.

She went away, a little ashamed of her rudeness, and told herself that she did not really care whether Fitzroy married this or that fashionable young woman. She had foreseen from the outset that he would end by marrying Lady Elizabeth Tufnell, and she was only annoyed at his having omitted to take

her into his confidence. As his cousin and the friend of his childhood, she was entitled to feel sore at his having left it to his sisters to tell her what she might have expected to hear from his own lips. At any rate, she mentally accounted after that fashion for her nerves being on edge and her temper liable to get out of hand upon slight provocation.

Slight provocation was given to her shortly after her return home by one whose manner had of late become even more familiar and overbearing than of yore. Budgett, as she had proved, was ready to forgive certain injuries, but it was clean beyond her power to forget that her nominal mistress, the so-called Miss Pennant, was in reality nobody at all, and consciousness of this had caused her, ever since her momentous discovery, to assert herself more than was prudent or becoming. She asserted herself now by bouncing into Cuckoo's presence with an angry remonstrance about the condition of the gown which the latter had just discarded.

"If you *must* walk through the muddy streets just after a shower of rain, you might take the trouble to stand on one side when a cab or an omnibus passes you! *I* never knew such a careless, extravagant girl! That new frock of yours is a ruin—splashed all over with stains which nothing will ever bring out!"

"It doesn't matter," said Cuckoo shortly.

"Doesn't it, indeed! Well, not to you, perhaps, but it matters a good deal to them as are expected to brush and clean your clothes, let me tell you—not to mention them as has to pay for them. I really should have thought that, after just having

had all your bills paid for you—and paid without a murmur, as one would say—you would have tried to be a little more economical. I declare I don't see how I'm to make excuses for you, if I'm asked to it!"

"I can not imagine anything much more unlikely than that you will be asked to make excuses for me, Budgett, and I can not allow you to scold me either. Please remember that I am no longer a child."

"For upward of fifteen years," began Budgett solemnly, "have I been striving to do my duty by you, Miss Cuckoo, and to carry out the last injunctions laid upon me by one who——"

"Oh, yes, I know," interrupted Cuckoo; "you have mentioned that once or twice before. But I am sure you never can have received injunctions to be so intolerably impertinent, and even if you had the time would now have come for you to disregard them. In your own interests, I mean."

"Perhaps," cried Budgett, folding her arms and throwing back her head, "you will have the goodness to explain what you mean by own interests."

"Certainly. What I mean is that you have a good place, and that you may lose it by trying my patience too far. Now, I know what you are going to say; but you had much better not say it, unless you wish to be taken at your word. Let it be agreed, if you like, that you are my father's servant, and that only he can dismiss you; nevertheless, you may be sure that that is just what he will do at a hint from me."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" cried Budgett, with

a menacing smile. "Then, since you're so kind as to advise me what I had better do and not do, I'll offer you a bit of advice in return. Don't you give that hint, or you may be sorry you spoke when it's too late. As for my situation, I don't know but what I oughtn't, in justice to myself, to have left it before now; but if ever I do leave it, I shan't wait to be dismissed, that you may depend!"

She had a good deal more to say, but she refrained from saying it, partly because she was not yet quite prepared to divulge all she knew, partly because she felt that in another moment she would break forth into undignified weeping. No sooner had she taken herself off, with the flutter of petticoats and squeaking of shoe leather which characterise her class when enraged, than Cuckoo, who was scarcely less angry, marched downstairs to her father's study. She had heard him come in, not long before, and she judged it best to strike while the iron was hot—in other words, while she was still sufficiently irritated to think striking worth while. Budgett must really be brought to her senses.

James listened patiently to the formal complaint addressed to him. He was very tired, very much occupied with matters of public importance, and not at all inclined to take a side in trumpery domestic wrangles; but his grave, sedate manner conveyed no intimation to that effect.

"If you wish me to speak to the woman, I will, of course, do so," he said; "but I think it would be better for her to take her orders and rebukes, when rebukes are required, from you now."

"She won't take anything from me," Cuckoo declared.

"Then I will tell her that she must either make up her mind to do so for the future, or look out for another situation. From what you say, and from the tone which she herself took up the last time I had an interview with her, I do not think that there is much prospect of your being able to retain her services, such as they are; but that must be a question for your own decision."

"She is sometimes intolerable, but I believe she is fond of me in her heart," observed Cuckoo, beginning to relent. "And—and I don't know that there is anybody else in the world of whom I can venture to say that," she added.

James stared straight before him, like a graven image; evidently his heart was proof against appeals and insinuations of that nature. He remarked, after a pause, that perhaps the best plan would be to pension Budgett off. "She has claims upon my purse which I am quite ready to admit. I am afraid I can't recognise unlimited claims on her part upon my time and my forbearance. Now, do you wish me to send for her or not?"

"I wish you to send for her, please," answered Cuckoo, "but not to send her away, if you can help it. I am sorry to have had to trouble you; only I don't see what else I could have done. Like the rest of the world, she is afraid of you, and she has a supreme contempt for me. In that respect also she resembles the rest of the world, I imagine."

No rejoinder or contradiction being forthcoming,

Cuckoo withdrew, and soon afterward Budgett was summoned into the presence of the stern employer whose destiny, she kept up her courage by reminding herself, she held "in the hollow of her hand."

The unconscious victim rushed upon his doom. He was so curt, so peremptory, so totally regardless in his few brief remarks of what was due to long and tried fidelity that a self-respecting woman could do no less than give him warning then and there.

"Very well," was his unhesitating reply, "so be it. You can not have forgotten, Budgett, what I said to you a short time ago upon this subject, and since you now state that you wish to leave I will not offer you an opportunity of changing your mind. I think myself that the time has quite come for you to give up a place which you could only keep upon conditions to which you do not choose to submit. But I also feel that the past can not be ignored——"

"Oh, if it comes to speaking about the past!" interjected Budgett meaningly.

"And therefore," continued James, "I must not let you leave this house without making suitable provision for your future. Whether you decide to remain in domestic service or not, I shall continue to pay you the same annual amount that you have lately been receiving as wages, and this, I hope, will at least suffice to keep you beyond fear of want."

The annual amount which Budgett had recently been receiving was so handsome that it really might almost have sufficed to maintain her in idleness; but everything, after all, is relative, and why should she be grateful for such an offer when she could, if she

chose—or, at any rate, thought she could—extort double or treble as much from Mr. Pennant by a mere threat of divulging his secret? So she returned, in accents trembling with rage:

"Not one penny, sir!—not one penny, I am obliged to you! If, after all I have done—yes, and I may say all I *haven't* done, too!—for you and yours, you can find it in your heart and conscience to turn me out of doors, I will not demean myself so far as to accept your charity. I will only say this—the consequences must be upon your own head! Don't blame me if I feel at liberty now to mention things as I might otherwise have took with me to my grave!"

James did not understand her. He was quite aware that things might truthfully be said about his late wife which would neither redound to her credit nor contribute to his comfort, and he assumed that he was menaced with a revelation of these; but he was the last man in the world to yield to intimidation.

"My good woman," he replied coldly, "I am not turning you out of doors; you have given me notice. If I do not allow you to reconsider your intention—and what you have just said would, in any case, have determined me not to do that—it is because I see no use in postponing what is clearly inevitable. You can either leave at once or at the end of a month, as you please. Either way your wages will continue to be paid to you, for you are, of course, at liberty to reconsider your refusal—and I have no doubt that you will reconsider it."

"Then I shall leave to-morrow morning, if you

please!" cried Budgett, choking down a host of emotions.

Why did she quit the room without so much as attempting to particularise the defiance which had been met with such supercilious disregard? Well, she had several reasons for beating her inglorious retreat, of which sheer cowardice was only one. To begin with (and this was what she preserved her self-esteem by reflecting), it was far from certain that so proud a man as James Pennant would have consented to pay blackmail, while, on the other hand, he would assuredly dismiss, without character or pension, any servant guilty of ransacking his private papers. Common prudence counselled the securing of a fresh place as a preliminary step to further operations. But, to do the woman justice, other and more disinterested motives had some weight with her. She was, like nearly all of us, neither wholly bad nor entirely good; she shrank a little from the idea of ruining a young life; and although she did not see why her important discovery should be allowed to count for nothing, it went against the grain with her to utilise it for purposes of mere revenge. Upon the whole, therefore, she resolved that Cuckoo should have one more chance.

Her method of intimating this concession was to announce without loss of time to the subject of her intended benevolence that all was over. "No! after what has been said to me to-day I couldn't, nor wouldn't stay in the house any longer than it will take me to pack up my things, not if you was to beg me ever so! To-morrow morning, as early as possible, I

leave, and so I have told your—so I have told Mr. Pennant."

"You are extremely foolish, I think," was Cuckoo's only remark.

"Not so foolish, maybe, as others whom I could name," returned Budgett darkly. "Make an enemy of me and you make an enemy of no fool, that I can assure you! Didn't I warn you, when you spoke of giving hints, that you would be sorry for it if you did? And, in the face of that, what must you do but run downstairs and complain of me! Now it just comes to this——"

"It just comes to this," interrupted Cuckoo, who was not in the best of tempers, "that you are nobody's enemy but your own. What do you expect me to do? I told my father that I didn't wish you to be sent away, but it seems that you have sent yourself away. Really I can't help that."

"For the sake of my poor dear mistress as is no more," Budgett solemnly declared, "I have submitted to a deal! I won't say but what I might even now—for her sake—be willing to overlook the ingratitude and the rudeness that I have had to bear this day. But if, after all I have done and borne for you, Miss Cuckoo, you no more mind parting with me than you would with a common kitchen-maid, then all I can say is that you must have a bad heart, and I shall not regret being forced to leave you!"

"I don't know what you have done and borne, Budgett," Cuckoo returned impatiently. "I should have said that you had had a remarkably easy and well-paid place for a great many years, and that you

have been allowed to take liberties which have done you no good. Anyhow, I am not going to beg you to stay against your will."

The altercation was continued in this style for another ten minutes or so, by which time both parties to it were thoroughly exasperated. Budgett, who had been the reverse of conciliatory throughout, and whose repeated innuendoes to the effect that it would be found dangerous to quarrel with her fell flat, wound up with a nobly dramatic gesture.

"I wash my hands of you!" she cried. "I have done with you! You are a scorpion!"

What put the finishing touch to her fury was that Cuckoo could not help laughing a little. She left the room, and on the following morning—the overtures for which she secretly continued to hope until the last minute not having been made—left the house, shaking the dust off her feet as she departed for a testimony against it.

It was now a matter of certainty that she would not fail to serve her late employers an ill turn; but neither of them felt much fear of her, nor did a note which Cuckoo received within a week from Lady Rochdale strike her as being the precursor of misfortune. Her ladyship wrote to make inquiries respecting "a woman named Budgett, who has applied to me for a situation as lady's maid. She tells me that she has been any number of years in your service and has now left by her own wish. The wages which she states that she has received sound to me quite ridiculous, but as she is ready to take less and seems to understand her duties, I am inclined to give

her a trial, provided that you can give me satisfactory answers to the following questions."

The questions which followed admitted of being answered in a manner both truthful and satisfactory, and Budgett was magnanimously eulogised.

"The least that I could do was to praise her up to the skies," Cuckoo afterward remarked. "Impossible though she had made herself of late, I do feel rather guilty about her, and I shall be very glad if she succeeds so soon in getting a good place."

"With Lady Rochdale?" said James. "Well, yes, I suppose that would be called a good place. She is to be congratulated, no doubt."

He was thinking that he himself was scarcely to be congratulated; for of all women Lady Rochdale was about the last whom he would have wished to be informed of poor Ada's escapades. Yet the stirring up of those ancient scandals—if, as seemed not unlikely, they were about to be stirred up—could not, after all, he reflected, do either him or Cuckoo much practical harm. He never gave a thought to the trouble which might overtake them both, should the facts relating to his supposed daughter's parentage transpire; for those facts, he felt sure, were known to nobody in England but himself.

CHAPTER XV.

VÆ VICTORIBUS.

"So you are going to smite them hip and thigh," said Lady Wardlaw, in accents of cheerful anticipation. "High time, too!"

"There is no doubt," answered James Pennant, "about its being high time for them to be smitten. The only question is whether the blow, if it succeeds, won't fall too late to avert the consequences of their insane policy. However, they have had to give us a day for our vote of censure."

"Which will be moved by you, I hope."

"Oh, of course not by me; that will be my leader's duty. But I shall speak, and I shall have a good deal to say."

"Naturally you will. Everybody must recognise, and does recognise, that you have made this subject your own. Let that miserably incompetent old Rochdale have it hot and strong, that's all! I am sure he deserves the worst that can be proclaimed against him!"

"I think he does, and I do not propose to show him any mercy," replied James, rather grimly.

That Lord Rochdale had proved himself a miserably incompetent Colonial Secretary was indeed

scarcely to be denied, even by those whom party allegiance compelled to defend him, and his recent exploits, which had brought about so irritated a state of public feeling in one of the principal dependencies of the empire that civil war seemed to be almost in sight, were not at all unlikely to wreck the then existing administration. They would perhaps have wrecked it already had the ministerial majority in the House of Commons been less strong; but this majority was now beginning to waver and diminish—shaken, it was believed, in no small degree by the vigorous and telling attacks of the Right Honourable James Pennant.

"It looks to me, my dear James," resumed Lady Wardlaw, "as if you had reached that tide in your fortunes which, taken at the flood, ought to land you in the next Cabinet. Then, I presume, you will be happy."

Sitting in the Berkeley Square drawing-room that afternoon, with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting upon his folded hands, he did not look particularly happy, nor did the brilliant prospect predicted for him by his cousin bring a smile to his grave eyes and lips.

"I suppose I should like to be a Cabinet minister," he observed presently; "that sort of thing is the natural and visible sign of success, and one has to be contented with such sorts of things as come within the range of possibility. Unfortunately, one never is."

"James, you exasperate me! What, in the name of goodness, would you have? You went in, heart

and soul, for politics, simply because you couldn't be induced to go in for anything else, and now that political life has done, or is upon the point of doing, its utmost for you, you have the air of being a blighted, disappointed mortal. It really isn't reasonable of you!"

"Yet I thought that if there was a quality upon which I might venture to pride myself a little, it was precisely my reasonableness."

"That only shows what an imperfect comprehension you have of your own nature. Now *I* have always read you like a book, and if you would only have consented to be guided by me!—but it is too late in the day by this time, I am afraid."

"Mercy upon us, yes! Whatever we do, let us not hark back to schemes for my welfare from which I am now, happily, protected by advanced age. If I had consented to be guided by you, Jane, I should doubtless at this moment be the husband of some charming lady whom I could not hope to charm, and with whom it is certain that Cuckoo would never have hit it off. Oh, I quite admit that if matters are not in all respects what one could wish, they might be a great deal worse."

"Don't you think," suggested Lady Wardlaw reluctantly, "that we are apt to expect rather too much? Isn't it wiser, I mean, to make the best of events—and people—such as they are? Because it's impossible for them to be made to order, you know."

She spoke with reluctance, for she guessed what he was driving at and would fain have avoided the subject. She had no very solid comfort to offer him;

she could not but be aware that Cuckoo's failure to hit it off with him had been as complete as though he had been that imaginary stepmother, and she doubted whether the girl was altogether to blame for that. Moreover, she was uncomfortably conscious of having been herself to blame in certain ways. When one undertakes to look after a *débutante*, one does not, after all, permit her to show herself here, there, and everywhere with a Harry Carew.

"You are quite right," answered James, who perhaps understood his old ally well enough to know what was passing through her mind; "one has to take them as one finds them—and one finds the female variety of them made after an unvarying pattern, more's the pity!"

Loyalty to her own sex impelled Lady Wardlaw to remark that men also, with a very few exceptions, were cast in an identical mould, which was not exactly an ideal one.

"As for you, you are only exceptional in the sense of being an exaggeration of the ordinary male type, and that is what makes you so horribly unjust to us. If you had a son you would look on placidly while he sowed his wild oats and accept his youthful peccadilloes as only natural; why can't you admit that we, too, in our much more modest and harmless way, must pass though the same phase?"

"Oh, if you are sure that your ways are so much more modest and harmless!"

"I am sure that it will be all right, James, unless you contrive by ill-timed sneers and sarcasms to make it all wrong. I dare say I have been rather negligent,

and perhaps Harry Carew may have done a little mischief—not half as much as you can do, though, if you give your mind to it. But after the next Drawing-room a fresh start will be made and the horizon considerably widened. Continue to busy yourself with the public affairs in which you are quite at home, and leave domestic policy, in which you are all abroad, to me. I make so bold as to assert that I am a trustworthy delegate."

That was about as near an approach to outspoken confidence as they reached. James longed to be consoled and reassured, but he could hardly ask for what he wanted without announcing in so many words that Cuckoo had deliberately deceived him, and that he had lost all confidence in the girl. Even to Jane Wardlaw is was impossible, consistently with his notions of honourable reticence, to make such a statement; so he was fain to rest satisfied with her buoyant promises, which he took to mean that a husband of whom nobody could disapprove would be forthcoming in the near future. And in truth he was a person much to be desired, that forthcoming husband. Women, it would seem, are created primarily in order that they may marry and bear children; the process draws forth their essential virtues and softens down, if it does not wholly extirpate, their failings; many a disappointing daughter has proved herself an admirable wife and mother; and, as Lady Wardlaw had sensibly remarked, disappointment is the just reward of those who expect too much. Nevertheless, a seat in some possible future Cabinet could scarcely be accounted as adequate compensation, and James,

marching homeward with head bent, sighed as he said to himself in the words of a poet whose writings had often found an echo in his heart, "Thou hast been, shalt be, art, alone."

For the matter of that, there was in Ennismore Gardens another poor mortal not less lonely than he, nor less convinced that permanent loneliness was her destiny, though very much less resigned to the prospect. For Cuckoo it remained, as it had ever been, a matter of well-nigh paramount necessity that she should be loved. She had in her an unbounded store of love, ready to be lavished upon somebody, and nobody (save one quite inadmissible scamp) seemed to be in the least ambitious of laying claim upon it. This was a very sad, and even a somewhat dangerous, state of things; but the sadness of it was a good deal more apparent to her than the danger. She had not seen Harry Carew since that impulsive avowal of his at Hurst Park, and did not—so she told herself—want to see him. Or, at least, if she occasionally did, that was only by reason of a certain tacit understanding between them, due probably to similarity of character. Harry, she was sure, would understand how easy it is to do wrong without being really bad at heart—a thing obviously incomprehensible in her father. Of him she despaired and gathered that he intended her to despair. She did not even attempt to show him that she was sorry for what she had done, conscious that such efforts were foredoomed to failure; their estrangement was the more marked because they were as polite and pleasant as possible to one another when they met.

They met at dinner that same evening, and from soup to dessert they talked wholly and solely about the threatened destruction of a world-wide empire. It is true that an impending conflict in a distant region might not necessarily bring about that sad result, and it is also true that such reasons as existed for apprehending it could scarcely be made clear to Cuckoo, who neither knew nor appeared to care what were the merits and demerits of the actual controversy; but some subject of conversation had to be discovered, and the ineptitude of the Secretary of State for the Colonies answered the required purpose well enough.

Cuckoo at length struck a somewhat more personal note in the discussion by remarking:

"I shall be curious to see what Fitzroy will do after you have torn his future father-in-law limb from limb. I should think his best plan would be to cut our acquaintance."

"I am not aware that Lord Rochdale is to be Fitzroy's father-in-law," answered James; "but even in that event, I hope he would not act so foolishly as to quarrel with his nearest relations. He has too much common sense, I imagine, to adopt a course which would be as inconvenient to himself as it would be to me."

"Oh, one can practically cut people without an open quarrel, and he undoubtedly means to marry Lady Elizabeth, and there would be a good deal of inconvenience, surely, in his keeping up a show of intimacy with us—not to mention the *inconvenance* of it! Oh, no; he had much better go over to the

enemy at once, bag and baggage, instead of trying ridiculously to stand with a foot in each camp. But I dare say he will be ridiculous enough to make the attempt."

"Political enemies," remarked James, "may be friends in private life. It so happens that I rather dislike Lord Rochdale personally and that he dislikes me; but I should be very sorry to force you into espousing my quarrels, public or private."

"You can't very well help it, can you? Besides, I really don't care."

James brought his eyes to bear upon the speaker. When a woman asserts that she does not care she usually means, of course, that she does, and for a moment it crossed his mind as a possibility that he was being made the subject of an indirect reproach. But Cuckoo met his gaze without embarrassment and replied unhesitatingly to his unspoken question.

"The grapes are not sour," said she; "the Radicals and the Rochdales are quite welcome to our poor Fitz. He is beautiful and wise and good, but I find that I haven't any use for him myself."

James smothered a sigh. Nothing seemed more probable than that Cuckoo could find "no use" for a young man who was wise and good; yet nobody stood in greater need of a permanent protector who possessed those titles to esteem. However, it was a good thing, no doubt, that she had not lost her heart to her cousin, since his affections, to all appearance, had been bestowed elsewhere.

A few days after this Miss Pennant was conducted by Lady Wardlaw to the House of Commons, in order

that she might enjoy the privilege of looking down upon a scene and listen to orations which promised to be of historical interest. The adjourned debate upon the vote of censure was in full swing that evening, and ministers were considered, so far, to have had a little the best of it. They had succeeded, that is to say, in justifying their policy to the extent that, given certain premises, it was difficult to see how they could have acted otherwise than as they had done. Fears, however, were entertained on one side of the House and hopes on the other that these premises were about to be ruthlessly cut from beneath their feet, and that was why belated members had to content themselves with standing room when James Pennant rose to make his expected onslaught.

It proved a fine fighting speech, that onslaught of his, finely delivered and supported by the logic of proved facts which he had at his fingers' ends. His task was, in one sense, comparatively easy, since he had public opinion, as well as facts, at his back; yet we know that majorities can not always be induced to convert themselves into minorities, even with the aid of such powerful allies, and perhaps the method employed by the orator was the only one which, at a moment of crisis, inopportune for a change of leadership, was likely to achieve the desired result. This was simply to seize the chief offender by the throat and nail his ears to the pump. For such chivalry and loyalty as may be implied in sticking to an erring colleague Mr. Pennant was willing to allow her Majesty's ministers full credit; still, as they had seen fit to make his policy their own, they must

stand or fall with him, and possibly they were not altogether reluctant to fall. That his policy would have to be reversed with promptitude and decision many of their followers, if not they themselves, doubtless knew; the essential thing was that as little time as possible should be lost in relieving them and the nation of responsibility for recent criminally foolish proceedings.

Always a clear and incisive speaker, James rose on this occasion to heights of almost passionate eloquence, and his denunciation of the Colonial Secretary was listened to with obvious glee by not a few of his opponents; for, in truth, matters had reached such a pass that a scapegoat was urgently needed. The Under Secretary for the Colonies did what he could for his chief by striking in again and again with interruptions and corrections, but these availed him little. Whether Lord Rochdale was or was not as black as his assailant painted him, he stood convicted of unpardonable bungling, and by the time that the House adjourned the general opinion was that ministers could not hope to escape defeat.

Long before that hour the exultant Lady Wardlaw was entertaining a select circle of friends at supper in Berkeley Square, whither Cuckoo had returned with her. Lady Wardlaw and her guests had attended the sitting of the House of Commons much as they might have attended a new play, and had found it much more worth their while than the best piece of the season. They were loud in their praises of the chief actor, declaring that to him alone belonged the glory of the assured victory, and predicting for him

future honours which, indeed, seemed to have been at last brought well within his grasp.

"*Tout vient à fin pour qui sait attendre*," his cousin complacently remarked. "I have always hoped to see James Prime Minister before the end of the century, and now I am quite sure that I shall."

Sir William remarked that he was reluctant to throw cold water upon excusable ambitions and enthusiasms, but, for his part, he must take leave to doubt whether a Prime Minister could be evolved out of the material in question. "James is as brilliant a debater as you please, and an able head of a department into the bargain, but he is much too confoundedly honest to succeed as leader of a party. He wouldn't budge an inch to conciliate anybody, and he would disown his best friend like a shot if he suspected him of having played either the knave or the fool."

"I think that is true, don't you?" said Cuckoo to her neighbour, addressing him for the first time since he had seated himself beside her.

"I should hope so," Fitzroy replied. "I am not much of a politician myself, and I don't quite understand what all the row is about, but I know I would a good deal rather be as straight as Uncle James than be First Lord of the Treasury, or whatever it is that he is threatened with becoming."

"Oh, you are as straight as he is," returned Cuckoo, upon whom this statement acted like the flick of a lash on a raw spot. "Nobody could be straighter than you are, both of you—or more incapable of making allowances for the crooked rest of us.

One admires your rigidity, but one feels that it can only be admired comfortably from a distance—at which, to do you justice, you are careful to hold inferior beings."

"I am sure I have never held you at a distance, Cuckoo," remonstrated the young man reproachfully.

"You are sure, I dare say, that you have never done anything you ought not to have done, nor left undone anything you ought to have done. How nice that must be for you! Not that you wouldn't have been fully justified in turning a sorrowful back upon the likes of me, and not that you won't have to do it now, justifiably or not. Lord Rochdale can't forgive that speech, can he?"

Fitzroy sighed. In his opinion it was rather doubtful whether Lord Rochdale could, while it was almost certain that Lady Rochdale would not. He did not, however, say so, but only answered Cuckoo's question with another.

"What has Lord Rochdale's displeasure to do with my turning my back upon you?—supposing, for the sake of argument, that anything would ever make me do such a thing."

Cuckoo tucked in her chin, inflated her cheeks, half closed her eyes and replied, in a thick, gobbling voice: "My dear boy, I wouldn't for the world ask you to quarrel with your people, but after the way in which we have been insulted by Mr. Pennant, it will be out of the question for us to keep up the acquaintance. Be civil to them, by all means, when you meet them, only don't go out of your way to meet them."

It was Lady Rochdale to the life, and Fitzroy,

vexed though he was, could not help laughing a little at the excellence of Cuckoo's mimicry. "But I don't take orders from that quarter," he protested.

"You will get them," the girl declared, adding, after a moment, "it really doesn't matter."

He said something about its mattering a good deal to him if it did not to her, but she had already risen from the supper table, and he had no subsequent opportunity of speaking to her before he took his leave. He went away rather sadly, for he perceived that he had somehow offended his cousin, and he could not doubt that that eloquent diatribe of his uncle's would produce the results which she foretold.

It was producing them at the very moment when Fitzroy, smoking a meditative cigarette beneath the stars, was on his way towards the Guards' Club. Lady Rochdale, home from an official dinner, followed by an official reception, had heard from her vexed lord what he had just heard himself—namely, that he had received his official deathblow—and it was therefore not surprising that her ladyship, who, when out of temper, had little control over her tongue, should be saying bitter and indiscreet things to her maid, while divesting herself of her jewelled trappings.

"If you have a grudge against that Pennant man, Budgett—as I gather from what you have insinuated to me that you have—now is your time to avenge yourself upon him. I would give a good deal to be able to pay him out for what he has done, and you seem to be bursting with some mystery or other. What is it? You shall have twenty pounds for it if it is worth twenty pounds."

Not for twenty thousand pounds, Budgett virtuously declared, would she consent to divulge any secret which might work injury to a fellow-creature; and although this may have been a slight exaggeration, it was probably true that she was as incorruptible as most people. But then it was also true that she was, as Lady Rochdale had asserted, bursting with her mystery, while it was just possible that the sense of duty to which she laid claim might have had a certain distorted actuality in her mind. Be that as it may, Lady Rochdale, by the time that she went to bed, had been placed in possession of a story which kept her wide-awake with anticipated triumph. James Pennant was going to deprive her and her husband of place and pay. Well, that could not be helped, but at all events his nose should be rubbed in the dust for it!

CHAPTER XVI.

CUCKOO GOES HER OWN WAY.

When a vote of censure upon the Government had been carried by a narrow majority in the House of Commons and a very large one in the House of Lords, enlightened and patriotic persons made haste to pat James Pennant on the back. It was the least that they could do, seeing that, by their account, he had preserved the British Empire from deadly peril, and he accepted their compliments and congratulations without protest, if with no great appearance of exultation; for he felt that he had in truth deserved well of his country. Credit was his due, in that he had performed a public duty with conspicuous success, and those (there were a few such) who whispered that his attack upon an incompetent minister had been prompted by motives of private enmity, could not have known much about the man.

High office was likewise due to him; there could be no question as to that, nor very much as to its being offered to him as soon as inevitable resignations should have been accepted, and the leader of the Tory party be placed in a position to recognise services rendered to the cause. Lady Wardlaw considered that her cousin ought, in common self-respect, to demand either the Chancellorship of the Exchequer or the

Home Secretaryship—nothing less. "You are indispensable; so you can dictate your own terms," said she. "Make yourself cheap, and you will be deservedly trodden under foot."

James knew that he was not indispensable, nor had he the slightest intention of demanding anything; certainly he did not aspire to fill posts upon which the claims of more experienced statesmen could scarcely be ignored. Nevertheless, he tasted some of the joys of a conquering hero. Honours and rewards are all very well if they come, and if they have been earned; but even when they are withheld a man may derive legitimate satisfaction from the knowledge that he has done his best in a subordinate capacity, and has accomplished his purpose. Satisfaction of this kind was the more welcome to Mr. Pennant inasmuch as it seemed to represent the sum total of what life had still to bestow upon him. Chancellor of the Exchequer he might possibly become some fine day, a man of mark in the Conservative ranks he already was and was sure to remain; in all other fields he had to pronounce himself a present and prospective failure. As a father (or nominal father) he had, for example, hopelessly broken down. Cuckoo was about as unlike the girl of his dreams—the truthful, straightforward, semimasculine young woman whom he had essayed to create—as she could possibly be. He thought, moreover, that she disliked, rather than liked him, while her absolute lack of interest in the career which he had chosen was too evident to stand in need of being emphasized. Yet she was pleased to exhibit this in an emphatic style.

"Is it really so tremendously serious?" she inquired. "Does it so very much matter, I mean, whether Lord Rochdale or some other pompous old person rules at the Colonial Office? One understands that it may matter a good deal whether this or that horse wins the Derby."

"It matters a little more than that, I think," answered James.

Cuckoo yawned. "Does it? I should have thought it was a question of stakes in both cases—and bets, of course, in the case of the Derby. But in the House of Commons you don't back yourselves for a place, perhaps. I wonder you don't; it would help to enliven the monotony of the proceedings."

James only responded by a silent shrug of his shoulders. Such juvenile levity and impertinence might have made him laugh, had he not perceived that the speaker's intention was to wound. And wounded he was; for indeed those whom we love always carry a dagger in their hands which, whether they use it skilfully or clumsily, can not fail to find its way through the joints of our harness. What he did not realise was that he had it in his power to strike back, and that he did so in a most effective manner by keeping his lips closed. Cuckoo, little as he supposed it, was proud of the laurels that he had won, eager to be taken into his confidence, mortified by his apparently contemptuous disregard of her, and jealous of the frequent conferences which he held with Lady Wardlaw during this period of political disturbance and change. If only he could have been

provoked into a quarrel. But that essentially feminine method of causing the clouds to burst and giving the sun a chance to break through them could scarcely be employed with a man of James Pennant's stamp. There was nothing for it, she concluded, but to go her own way and let him go his. That, to all appearance, was what he desired.

Her own way led her, one afternoon, to Chesham Place—not so much because she wanted to call upon Mrs. Carew, as because she had received no request to do so and was somewhat at a loss to account for the omission. If the jealous and ridiculous Julia seriously believed that a girl who might have been her daughter was ambitious of undermining her domestic felicity, it would be a kindness, surely, to disabuse her of that illusion.

But Mrs. Carew, who was at home and disengaged, welcomed her young friend so cordially and amicably that there was no pretext for putting forward sincere disclaimers. The poor woman was, as a fact, jealous, and had fair reason to be so, yet in some of her varying moods she felt that it was futile, as well as undignified, to complain of her husband. If his errant fancy had been arrested for a moment by Cuckoo Pennant, what did it matter? His fancy never was, never had been, never would be under control, and this passing infatuation was, at all events, less likely to have scandalous consequences than certain of his previous ones. So she said:

"How nice of you to look me up! I had been saying to myself that I must not hope to see you again before Ascot, for I never go to Epsom, and

I have been feeling too tired and out of sorts for theatres of late."

"Is one supposed only to utilise one's friends for racing and play-going purposes?" Cuckoo asked.

"Oh, if you are kind enough to call me a friend of yours. But, really, I have no friends left in these days. It is only Harry's friends who ever come to the house, and they are—well, they are not always exactly congenial. But let us talk about some more interesting subject. Have you got your presentation gown yet? Describe it to me."

There was a good deal to be said upon that subject, and Mrs. Carew appeared to take a genuine, sympathetic interest in it. Other subjects, equally unexceptionable, served to sustain a prolonged colloquy, and by what subtle feminine methods of intercommunication the two women, whose thoughts all the time were occupied with quite different matters, contrived to irritate one another, it would be hard to explain. But they did somehow manage to achieve this result and to make frequent allusions to the absent Harry, although his name was not once mentioned. Through the medium aforesaid, Cuckoo offered a species of apology, implying that she was really very sorry, but that anybody with a grain of common sense might have known better than to suspect her of having laid snares for an elderly Lothario; while Mrs. Carew rejoined, in effect, "Pray don't disturb yourself; you are only one out of a hundred, and he will tire of you in a few months, if not in a few weeks. It is not in the least on my own account that I mind; all I regret is that a girl of your

age should not see the need for a little more discretion."

Thus, by the time that tea was carried into the room, no love was lost between these ladies, who continued to exchange smiles and honeyed words. The elder, who had a little the worst of the veiled encounter, was disposed to blame Miss Pennant as much as her husband; the younger was of opinion that if Harry Carew found his wife impossible, ample excuse might be discovered for him.

The culprit thus partially exculpated on both sides made his appearance unexpectedly, just as Cuckoo was upon the point of departure. For him to show himself in his wife's drawing-room at that hour of the day was so unusual an event that the idea of an assignation at once suggested itself to Julia, who read confirmation of her suspicions in the slight flush which rose to her visitor's cheeks. She drew in her lips and puckered her brow, while Cuckoo, on her side, was momentarily embarrassed. But Harry, although he took in the situation at a glance, was more tickled than disconcerted by it. Conscious innocence, no doubt, sustained him and enabled him to exclaim cheerfully:

"See what one gets by coming home to tea, like a good little man! You are the very person whom I wanted to meet, Miss Pennant. I have any amount of important racing intelligence to give you."

"It will have to wait, I am afraid," answered Cuckoo, "for my time is up, and I must say goodbye."

Harry accompanied her downstairs. Good man-

ners rendered it obligatory upon him to do as much as that, but nothing compelled him, when he saw that no carriage was waiting at the door, to ask whether she was walking and offer to see her part of the way home.

"I am only going to walk until I meet a hansom, and I think, all things considered, you had better let me go alone," she answered somewhat dryly.

"That means that Julia has been upbraiding you, I suppose."

Cuckoo did not reply, nor did she make any further attempt to dissuade him from putting on his hat. They had walked side by side for some little distance down the street before he resumed:

"It's really too ridiculous, you know! I hope you gave her to understand that she is making a gratuitous fool of herself."

"I dare say I should have done that if she had upbraided me, but she didn't. She only hinted that I was making a fool of myself—or being made a fool of, which, after all, wasn't very ridiculous of her, when you come to think of it."

"Surely it is ridiculous to imagine that I have it in my power to—to——"

"Oh, yes, but she doesn't see you with my eyes, you must remember. To her most likely you are still as youthful and attractive as you ever were."

Harry thought this remark rather needlessly cruel, and he could not refrain from saying so. "In common justice, now, have I ever tried to disguise from you that I am as old as the hills?"

"You told me the other day that you loved me," returned Cuckoo uncompromisingly.

"It is my misfortune that that is true; but I shouldn't have told you the truth if I hadn't known that it could make no possible difference to you. I call Julia ridiculous for being jealous without the shadow of an excuse."

"You don't call that the shadow of an excuse?"

"Well, I'll call it the shadow, if you like; I certainly can't call it the substance. Why, if she had a grain of common sense, she would be only too thankful! She ought to realise that an absolutely pure and disinterested affection is the one thing that is likely to keep me straight."

Cuckoo, though she was not feeling particularly merry, broke out into irrepressible laughter. "You are very funny sometimes," she remarked.

"Perhaps I sound so, but in reality I am as serious as possible. Nothing would ever make a saint of me; only I don't believe I should be half such a sinner as I am—I doubt whether I should be much of a sinner at all—if there were anybody in the wide world who cared a pin about me. One goes to the deuce because it is easy and because it doesn't signify, not because one wouldn't gladly steer for paradise."

"I don't hold the keys of paradise," said Cuckoo.

"For me you do. Your friendship—and it's understood, of course, that I don't dream of asking you for anything more—is just what may prove the salvation of me. If you and Julia are going to fall out, and if I am to see no more of you—well, then the sooner I disappear from the scene the better."

There was a simplicity about this egotism which could not fail to reach the heart of an unprejudiced sympathizer. Moreover, a request so humble was both flattering and consolatory to one who was beginning to feel as if she had no friends.

"At that rate," Cuckoo presently remarked, "perhaps we might strike a bargain for our mutual benefit, for I doubt whether you can be much more in need of a kindred spirit than I am. I don't suppose there is much danger of my going to the deuce—I should hardly know how to set about it—but I sometimes wish that I could disappear from the scene. I seem to have made such a hopeless hash of my part, so far!"

"Ah, if we could only disappear together!" sighed the incorrigible Harry.

He had to say that sort of thing; he really could not help it, and he really did not mean it. He ended by assuring her (in response to expostulations) that he did not mean it; and this was very true, although the causes of his insincerity were not exactly those which he alleged. And with regard to that suggested compact between them, it was in all conscience innocent enough. They were, they agreed, a couple of round pegs in square holes, they understood one another, but their respective nearest relations did not, unfortunately, understand them. Nothing, therefore, could be more natural or more harmless than that they should meet from time to time and relieve their feelings by reciprocal confidences. They proceeded to exchange confidences now, sitting side by side on a bench in the Green Park, whither they had wandered

without noticing that the direct road from Chesham Place to Ennismore Gardens does not lie in that direction. Cuckoo learned that Julia, although admittedly injured and neglected, knew how to give as good as she received and to make her husband wish he were dead; Harry was told how James Pennant contrived to be at one and the same time the best of men and the most unapproachable of fathers. The upshot of it all was that the allies became extremely sorry for themselves and for each other.

"Well," observed Harry, when at length Cuckoo, after glancing at her watch, started to her feet, "it's a topsy-turvy world, and if I were ten years younger and you were ten years older—but that's a forbidden subject! Only I want to say just for this once—I won't say it again—that, if ever you should find yourself really in a hole——"

"Yes?"

"I mean you might—one never knows—be driven to desperation; you might be pestered to marry a man whom you hate, or something of that kind—then you'll remember—won't you?—that there is one unworthy wretch who asks no better fate than to give up everything for your sake."

Upon that somewhat equivocal profession they parted. Harry's meaning could only be that he was ready at a word to eclipse all the scandals of his previous record; but it did not greatly signify what he meant, seeing that the contingency to which he dimly alluded could by no possibility arise. Whatever her father's defects might be, Cuckoo was well aware that she would never be urged by him to marry against

her inclinations, nor would her affection for her only friend ever prompt her to place herself under his sole protection. Still she did almost wish that he were a bachelor and that they were more nearly of an age. "I couldn't have fallen in love with him even then," she reflected, "but his having fallen in love with me would have answered all the purpose, I dare say."

On reaching home she encountered the master of the house, who was in the act of letting himself in with his latchkey, and who remarked, just by way of saying something, "You look very tired. What have you been doing?"

Cuckoo did not answer the question, but stated rather brusquely that she was not a bit tired. "*You* look tired," she added. "That is chronic and unavoidable just now, though, I suppose."

"Well, yes; for some days to come I must expect to be a good deal hurried and worried."

"*Des goûts et des couleurs!*" remarked Cuckoo, with a jerk of her shoulders. "I shouldn't have thought it was worth while myself; but then I couldn't imagine anybody thinking politics worth while."

James went into his study, threw himself down in his chair and stretched out his weary limbs. "Perhaps politics are not worth while; perhaps nothing in life is worth while," he said to himself despondently; for, indeed, he did not care much about anything in life, now that Cuckoo and he were so hopelessly alienated from one another.

He began to open and read his letters, one of which contained the formal offer that he had been

led in the course of the day to expect—an offer of an important department and a place in the new Cabinet. He perused it listlessly and tossed it aside; but the next communication that he examined caused him to assume an erect attitude, draw in his breath quickly, and turn pale.

For this, though written in no unfriendly spirit, was a most disagreeable, as well as a wholly unanticipated one. It emanated from a certain court functionary of his acquaintance, who wrote privately and confidentially to say that he feared there was going to be a difficulty about Miss Pennant's presentation. "You will probably receive some official intimation upon the subject from the Lord Chamberlain's office; but I thought I would just drop you a line, so that you may at once, if you think fit, contradict unpleasant rumours. It is asserted (I would rather not say upon what authority, and of course I don't know with how much or how little truth) that Miss Pennant is not really your daughter at all, but a French girl, adopted by you in her infancy. I need not point out to you that, although this might not prove a bar to her being received, her presentation, under a false name, would never be allowed to take place, and I am sure you would prefer to be told without further delay of a report which, I am afraid, is sure to spread, unless nipped in the bud."

The victim of this thunderbolt out of a clear sky was for some moments completely bewildered. Who on earth could have discovered and revealed a secret so many years old and hitherto so scrupulously kept? But, being a quick-witted man, he was soon able to

answer his own query. "Lady Rochdale, instructed by Budgett," he muttered. "Where and how Budgett obtained her information one doesn't see—and it doesn't matter. The question is, what is to be done?"

He took two or three rapid turns up and down the room and then rang the bell. "Tell Miss Pennant not to wait dinner for me; I find that I am obliged to go out," he said to the butler, who presently appeared, "and I want a hansom at once."

The hour was rather a late one for paying visits, but there was no need to stand upon ceremony with Jane Wardlaw, and her advice was worth having, even at the price which must necessarily be paid for it.

CHAPTER XVII.

COUNCILS AND COUNSELS.

"HER LADYSHIP is at home, sir," the Berkeley Square butler said when James arrived at his destination; "but I believe she has gone to dress for dinner. Could I send any message to her, sir?"

This considerate offer was suggested by the visible eagerness of the Right Honourable gentleman, who might reasonably be supposed to have important political intelligence to impart, and who answered:

"Yes; ask her whether she can spare me a quarter of an hour. Say that I want to see her rather particularly."

James was sure that, if his cousin were dining out, she would not mind keeping her entertainers waiting a quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, in order to oblige him, and that his confidence in her was not misplaced he was speedily made aware. No sooner had he been conducted to her boudoir than she swept in, arrayed in a hastily donned tea-gown, to ask expectantly: "Well?—is it the Home Office?"

"They give me my choice of India or the Colonies," replied James, "but——"

"But what? That implies Cabinet rank, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes; but——"

"You will drive me crazy with your 'buts' and your doleful countenance! Surely you can't be going to say that that isn't good enough!"

"Of course it is good enough, and of course I accept with gratitude; but—please allow me to say 'but' once more and to end my sentence—I didn't come here at this unwarrantable hour to make an announcement which you will read in to-morrow morning's papers. I wish for you advice with regard to another and a much more unpleasant matter."

"Cuckoo has been getting into trouble!" exclaimed Lady Wardlaw, apprehensively.

"She is perhaps going to get into trouble—through no fault of her own. I must tell you something about her which will certainly astonish you, and which I dare say I ought to have told you long ago. In how brief a space of time, I wonder, can you be astonished, recover your mental balance, and grant useful counsel to a perplexed man? Have you people dining here, or are you going out to dinner?"

"Neither," answered Lady Wardlaw, after a quick scrutiny of her visitor's features. "We were going out, but I find that I am too bad with neuralgia to stir, and I will write at once to say so."

She hastily scribbled a few lines, rang the bell and despatched her note, together with a message to Sir William that he need not hurry, as dinner would be at home, after all, and not before nine o'clock.

"Now, James," said she, settling herself in an easy-chair, "you can proceed at your leisure. I know by the look of you that I am about to hear something

horrid, and I know by experience that you won't put me out of my pain in a few words."

"I can tell you the worst of it in a very few words," answered James. "The worst of it is simply this: Cuckoo is not my child!"

"Good gracious!"

"I thought you would be horrified. No, she hasn't a drop of Pennant blood in her veins. Poor Ada, who, as you know, never had any children of her own——"

"Oh, come! this isn't quite so awful. I thought, of course, you meant that she was Ada's child, but not yours."

James, despite his distress, could not help laughing. "You are in such a desperate hurry to jump to conclusions, Jane, that you overlook the inherent improbability of my making such a confession as that. What I was going to say was that my wife, being childless and lonely, took it strongly into her head to adopt an orphan out of a convent in the south of France. I consented to her doing so, not very willingly, still I did consent, and I had reasons which at the time seemed to me to be good ones. Then, as might perhaps have been anticipated, she set her heart upon making the baby her own in every sense of the term, and to that also, after some hesitation, I consented. I was a fool, no doubt."

"I think you were," said Lady Wardlaw.

"Yes; but there appeared to be little or no risk of future complications. The circumstances were exceptionally favourable; we were far away from kith and kin, we happened to be changing our servants

as well as our temporary abode; nobody was at all likely to discover the truth, nor could anybody be injured by it if it were discovered."

"Except, perhaps, the girl herself."

"Ah, exactly!—you put your finger upon the weak spot there. Yet the difficulty which has actually arisen would have sounded ridiculously far-fetched and fantastic then, if one had thought of it and mentioned it. Who could foresee that the girl would have to be presented some fine day, and that facts which had been successfully concealed from her babyhood would transpire just in time to scandalise the Lord Chamberlain?"

"Oh, *that's* it, is it? How dreadfully unfortunate! How could you be so foolish as to allow the facts to transpire?"

James explained. An enemy had done this thing. He related the story of Budgett's dismissal and subsequent engagement by Lady Rochdale, adding that there could be very small doubt, in his opinion, as to who had given information. "By what means she obtained her information I can't imagine, but she threatened before she left to reveal something which would make me regret having parted with her, and this is evidently her way of keeping her word."

Lady Wardlaw shook her head and observed that it was rather serious. "You have documents, I presume, which you can produce, if called upon."

"Oh, of course."

"Because otherwise, I mean, one doesn't know what reports might not get about. Well, if I were you, I should go straight to the Lord Chamberlain

with my documents and conceal nothing from him. He may make a fuss, and, considering that you have just kicked him out of office, most likely he will; still one has heard of similar cases, and the main thing, after all, is that the presentation should not be deferred."

"I was thinking," answered James, "that the main thing was rather that it should. Excuses can easily be found for a postponement, and there will soon be a new Lord Chamberlain, who at least will belong to our party. For all practical purposes, Cuckoo *is* my daughter; there is no reason that I know of why she should not be publicly called my daughter, or why a confidential admission of the truth should not be treated as confidential."

"There is still less reason, it seems to me, why she should not be publicly acknowledged to be your adopted daughter. Her mother's people are all right, you say, and her father is dead and buried; so she won't be in any way disgraced. It is a case for candidly announcing the actual facts, and I can't understand why you didn't announce them from the first."

"I despair of making you understand. All I can say is that I feel pledged to secrecy. I made certain promises to my wife, which must be kept if I can possibly keep them. Then, too—but that you certainly wouldn't understand, so we'll leave it alone. The long and the short of it is, Jane, that rightly or wrongly, I would give a large sum of money to keep things dark. The question is, *can* they be kept dark?"

"Obviously not. That malignant Rochdale

woman would want a much larger sum than you could offer her as the price of holding her tongue. Besides, it is too late; she has probably told scores of people all she knows, and a good deal that she doesn't, by this time."

In all probability she had. James, stroking his chin meditatively, could not but admit that; and yet what proofs could Lady Rochdale possess? "I am not quite prepared to throw up the sponge," he said.

Lady Wardlaw was impatiently pointing out to him that he really had no alternative when Sir William came in, rather cross, to ask whether there was any objection to his dining at his club. "One is willing to obey orders to the extent of breaking an engagement, but one would a little rather not be fed upon warmed-up scraps," he plaintively explained.

"There is plenty of fresh food in the house, and James is going to stay and dine with us," answered his wife. "No, I can't let you go out this evening; you are wanted at home. You might consult a worse person than William," she added, turning to her cousin; "nobody has ever accused him of being wanting in common sense or knowledge of the world. May I tell him what is the matter?"

So Sir William was consulted, and, not a little to Lady Wardlaw's surprise, he did not at once adopt her view of the situation.

"I see," said he, nodding. "James wishes—and it is just what I should wish myself in his place—to spare the poor child what, when all is said, she must feel to be a shock and a sort of humiliation. The thing isn't absolutely unworkable, you know. I don't

venture to predict that we shall succeed; but, with time on our side, and the change of ministry and all, we may. It is worth trying, anyhow. Lady Rochdale, who has listened to the gossip of a discharged servant, can't make out a very strong case, and James isn't bound to reply to her. The whole difficulty, when you come to think of it, resolves itself into squaring the court officials, and I should think that their consciences might be found elastic enough to oblige a Cabinet minister."

"Ah, but that isn't the whole difficulty," objected Lady Wardlaw. "Supposing—though I don't for one moment suppose it—we do contrive to get Cuckoo presented as James's daughter, we shall still have to reckon with rumours which are certain, sooner or later, to reach her ears, and what kind of a figure shall we cut when she asks us whether they are true or false? My belief is that prompt honesty will be our best policy."

"Rumours of a most startling character are constantly circulated about persons who are the very last to hear of them," observed Sir William. "We are embarking upon a rather forlorn hope, if you like; still there *is* just a hope."

"Exactly so," agreed James; "you understand my point of view, William, though Jane doesn't. It is an illogical point of view, and altogether opposed to the precepts and practice of my life; but I can't help that. I made an initial mistake, knowing pretty well that it was a mistake, and any unpleasant results that may ensue ought, I feel, to fall upon me, not upon Cuckoo."

"That," remarked Lady Wardlaw, "sounds all very fine; only it appears that there will either be no unpleasant results or else—which is ever so much more probable—that you will have to go shares in them. And don't you think that the unpleasantness would be lessened for you if you were to make a clean breast of it, instead of waiting to be found out?"

However, she proved what a kind-hearted woman she was by giving in, notwithstanding her entirely justifiable conviction that she was in the right. It was decided that Cuckoo should be told, upon no matter what plea—the confusion incident upon a change of ministry would serve as well as another—that she must wait a few weeks longer for the privilege of doing obeisance to her sovereign, and the amiable conspirators hoped that, in the meantime, nobody would have quite such atrociously bad taste as to hint to her that a mystery hung over her parentage. Lady Wardlaw's cook showed herself equal to the sudden demand made upon her; so that before his guest left him Sir William was in an excellent and sanguine humour.

"Cheer up, old man," said he; "we'll pull through by hook or by crook. I don't pretend to be influential myself, but Jane is, and so, after a fashion, are you. Bless your soul! much queerer stories than this lie comfortably buried in hundreds of graves and will never be heard of again."

No doubt that is so; yet it is not easy for a rigidly honourable man to cheer up under the consciousness that he is about to act lies, and even, perchance, to tell them. James returned home, a prey to sad fore-

bodings and misgivings, which were partially fulfilled as soon as he had taken his first step on the path of concerted dissimulation. Cuckoo, who had risen from the piano as he entered, and who had listened to what he had to say with slightly raised eyebrows, naturally wanted to know what connection there could be between her presentation at Court and the approaching retirement of Liberal officials.

"Personally," she declared, "I don't care a straw whether the ceremony takes place now or next month, and I shouldn't break my heart if it never took place at all; but if the other *débutantes* are to make their courtesys, why shouldn't I make mine?"

Evidently she smelt a rat—it would have been rather odd if she had not, considering the halting and embarrassed style in which James's explanation had been put forward, and his evasive reply to the effect that he was so busy, and that the Wardlaws also were rather busy, and that a postponement had been thought desirable on several grounds, was scarcely of a nature to allay nascent suspicions.

Cuckoo shrugged her shoulders, remarked that it was really all one to her, and went back to the piano. She perceived, of course, that a hitch had somehow occurred; but her curiosity was not greatly excited about the matter. What did hurt her a little was the haste and alacrity with which her father quitted the room. "He hates the very sight of me now," she thought to herself. "I believe he only went out to dinner because he couldn't face the prospect of a solitary evening with me."

The following morning's post brought her an ur-

gent and affectionately worded invitation to luncheon from her aunt, Mrs. Arthur Pennant. "Do come, if you have no other engagement. It isn't a party, but the girls would like to see you, and I myself have things to say which it would take too long to write about. Fitz has promised to look in upon us, preparatory to attending some garden party or other for which the Rochdales have booked him. If you can't possibly come, send me a wire and I will try to find my way to Ennismore Gardens in the course of the afternoon; but I *hope* you won't disappoint us."

It did not, Cuckoo thought, require a person of exceptionally bright intelligence to read between the lines of that ingenuous missive. Fitzroy, of course, had engaged himself to Lady Elizabeth, and his fond mother was eager to tell everybody the good news. Some of Fitzroy's friends and well-wishers might, to be sure, doubt whether the news that he was bent upon allying himself for life with an affected little goose was altogether good; but they would have to congratulate him all the same, and the sooner that obligatory piece of hypocrisy was over and done with the better. So the invitation was accepted and the appointment duly kept.

Actual congratulations would, however, be premature, it appeared. Gwen and Ella, who embraced Cuckoo *à tour de bras* on her arrival, informed her, in answer to her blunt question, that nothing was as yet announced or even settled. Something, they quite hoped and believed, would be announced very shortly, but for the present all they knew was that

Lord and Lady Rochdale, like Barkis, were willing. They had signified as much, and very nice it was of them, these artless maidens opined, to have done so, considering that their daughter might obviously make a far more distinguished match. Not that dear Fitz was not really good enough for anybody, only, as he had neither title nor wealth, his diffidence was as natural as it was becoming.

"Let him take courage," said Cuckoo dryly; "he is in no danger of being refused—*c'est moi qui vous en réponds!*"

He himself certainly did not seem to be apprehensive of failure. He made his appearance presently in excellent spirits, and he was not so preoccupied with his own affairs during luncheon but that he was able to give evidence of a kindly interest in those of his cousin, who sat beside him. He was surprised and concerned to hear that she was not, after all, to be presented at the next Drawing-room; he wanted to know why that indispensable ceremony had been put off, and ventured to hope (in a whisper) that she had not incurred the displeasure of Lady Wardlaw or Uncle James.

"I assure you," was the reply vouchsafed to him, "that I have not been put into the corner for misconduct; but even if I had, your prospects would scarcely be imperilled. Pennants and Tufnells are much the same thing as Montagues and Capulets now; so, as you belong to the opposite faction, in spite of your name, you need not distress yourself about the likes of me."

"I don't belong to any faction," Fitzroy de-

clared, "and I'm sure I don't know what I have done to deserve that sort of accusation."

He was not enlightened; nor, it might be presumed, was he very eager for enlightenment, since he did not persevere with the subject. Cuckoo saw no more of him after luncheon; immediately upon the conclusion of which meal she was led away by her aunt into a little dark library, where coffee was served to them all by themselves.

"I wanted to speak to you alone, my dear," began Mrs. Pennant, whose jolly countenance had assumed an expression of unaccustomed gravity, "because——"

"Oh, I know!" interrupted Cuckoo. "There is going to be a wedding in the family, and you hope it won't bring about family dissensions. You may make your mind quite easy on that score; if I had any influence with my father—which I haven't—there would be no need for me to use it. Lord and Lady Rochdale are a great deal more likely to quarrel with him than he is to quarrel with them."

"I dare say they are; and if there must be a quarrel—as Lady Rochdale seems to think that there must—neither you nor I can help it. What I have to tell you is something which I have heard from her and which, I am very much afraid, is true. True or untrue, I don't think the story ought to be concealed from you, and what's more, I don't think it *can* be."

This exordium did not in the least prepare Cuckoo for the statement which followed. She listened to it in chilled, awe-struck silence, convinced, without

proof or confirmation, of its accuracy, and feeling instinctively that it explained many things hitherto obscure to her. The just, severe, unsympathetic father, who was not really her father, became revealed to her as one upon whom a most uncongenial task had been imposed, and who had discharged that task from a mere sense of duty, unsustained therein by anything in the shape of acquired paternal affection. It also struck her that his notions of what constituted duty were of a very one-sided character. But to her informant she only remarked:

"Well, if I have been sailing under false colours all this time, I have done it ignorantly, and I don't see what right Lady Rochdale or anybody else has to condemn me."

"My dear girl, nobody dreams for a moment of condemning you," she was assured; "only it does, unfortunately—there is no help for that, I am afraid —make a difference. Of course the whole story may be a fable, and I sincerely hope it is; but, if so, James ought to lose no time in contradicting it, because, you see——"

"Because Lady Rochdale hasn't lost any time in spreading it abroad?"

"I don't know that she has spread it abroad; she professed to speak to me in confidence. But naturally she does not love James, and she can hardly be expected to spare him. In short, I think your best course will be to let him know at once what is being said."

"Why," inquired Cuckoo, "haven't you done that yourself?"

The big, red-faced woman held up a pair of deprecating hands. "Because I funked it!" she honestly avowed. "I have never been accounted a coward, but the truth is that that man strikes terror into my craven soul. If I had sent for him or had gone to him, he would certainly have recommended me, in the most courteous terms, to mind my own business. Now, he can't very well take up that tone with you, for he must admit that this *is* your business."

"I suppose he must," Cuckoo agreed. "I will ask him, then, to contradict the report and to bring an action for slander against Lady Rochdale—if he can. If he can't——"

"Well, supposing that the worst comes to the worst, there is no law against the adoption of orphans," said Mrs. Pennant consolingly.

"But there is a social law, perhaps, against their being given names which they have no right to use. I quite understand, and you may be sure that I won't continue to be a fraud a minute longer that I can help."

Cuckoo left the house without saying good-bye to her so-called cousins or making much response to the affectionate condolences of her so-called aunt. She thought to herself, as she drove homeward, that the chances were rather against her ever seeing any of them again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FITZROY IS HIGHLY FAVOURED.

Ladies who speak with all the authority that belongs to experience, and not without some show of reason, are wont to smile at the ingrained masculine belief that nothing except flattery really succeeds with their charming sex, and to maintain that our vanity is at least equal to theirs, while we are far more easier taken in than they. What they are not quite so willing to allow is that these facts (supposing them, for the sake of argument, to be facts) only prove our greater integrity and simplicity; although—seeing that they are not, as a rule, ambitious of being considered simple and innocent—they ought not to grudge us such a modest pretension.

Be that as it may, Fitzroy Pennant entertained much too humble an opinion of his own attractions, physical and other, to imagine for one moment that the many kindnesses of which he had been the recipient at the hands of Lady Rochdale and her fair daughter could be accounted for by a mere vulgar desire on their part to capture him. With his small fortune in hand, and his respectable, but by no means magnificent, fortune in the bush, he was obviously no great catch; nor was it less obvious (by his way of

thinking) that Lady Elizabeth might aspire to an infinitely higher social position than he could offer her. That in reality he was not to be sneezed at, that occupants of more lofty social positions had neglected, so far, to place themselves in rivalry with him, and that half a loaf is always preferable to no bread—these were reflections for lookers-on, not for principals; the young Guardsman only knew that Lady Elizabeth was as amiable as she was pretty, that her mother was "not a bad old sort in her way," and that both of them had been as nice as possible to him. He had not, through many weeks of intimacy, been quite positive that he was in love with the younger lady, greatly though he liked and admired her; but now he began to feel pretty well free of doubt upon that point. If he was not in love with her why did he persistently run after her wherever she went? His mother had put that pertinent question to him, and he had found himself unprepared with any answer, save the one anxiously invited. Well, a man is glad, of course, to be able to please his family while at the same time pleasing himself: it is not, after all, every day that duty, inclination, prudence, and worldly wisdom can be harnessed into one obedient team.

It was in a very fairly complacent mood, therefore, that Fitzroy, after a longish chat with Gwen and Ella and a few pregnant parting words from Mrs. Pennant, set forth from the domestic luncheon mentioned in the last chapter to keep his appointment. He was going to be conducted by Lady Rochdale to a garden party, given by a certain great lady whose historic

mansion was situated on the outskirts of London; he was going to propose to Lady Elizabeth that very afternoon—he had even been given to understand that it would be expected of him to do so—and he was going to be accepted. This also he had been given to understand, and he had reasons of his own for hoping that the prophecy was not over bold. For what reason he should, under such agreeable circumstances, have become aware of an odd longing to take to his heels it would be hard to say. Perhaps such sensations are not altogether without precedent; perhaps the last moment before riding at an unshirkable fence or taking a header off a very high bank is apt, for a good many of us, to be associated with ignoble temptations.

It is needless, however, to add that we never think of yielding to them; nor did Fitzroy, when once he was seated in Lady Rochdale's yellow barouche, with his back to the horses, wish himself elsewhere. He was really in a very pleasant place, driving through sunny London streets, with a couple of exquisitely dressed ladies facing him, and the pedestrians whose attention was attracted by a somewhat showy equipage no doubt set him down for the lucky dog that he was. Lady Rochdale was in one of her most gracious tempers; Lady Elizabeth, always pretty and always smiling, looked particularly well in a white costume with pale blue facings and glittering jewelled embroideries. Her delicate complexion assumed a faint, becoming tinge of pink when her opposite neighbour bent forward, with his elbows on his knees, to speak in a low voice to her; if all this was not enough to sat-

isfy an expectant suitor, he must indeed have been difficult to please.

Hosts of smart and distinguished people were congregated upon the smooth, shady lawn where our young man was presently deposited, and which, after paying his respects to his hostess, he made haste to quit. He quitted it, in point of fact, by preconcerted arrangement with his white and blue companion, who knew the grounds better than he did, and who had kindly promised, on the way down, to show him some of their more secluded beauties.

"Isn't it lovely!" she exclaimed, when they had strolled away from the crowd and the tents and the braying band, into an Italian garden, surrounded by tall hedges of clipped yew, where they were as completely alone as if the whole of the gay world had not been within a stone's throw of them. "And to think that these paths and borders would realise a large fortune if they were sold and divided up into building lots!"

"That," observed Fitzroy, "doesn't add anything to their beauty."

"It adds a great deal to their value, though. Don't you think there is something rather magnificent in keeping up such a place as this instead of letting it go?"

"I think there would be something rather sordid and disgraceful in letting it go, and I am sure you agree with me."

"Do I?" asked Lady Elizabeth pensively.

"Certainly you do. If you thought, as most people do nowadays, that hard cash is the one and only

thing worth securing, you would have married some millionaire or other before now."

"I suppose I should," said Lady Elizabeth, forgetting, perhaps, that she had not as yet been assailed by the temptation referred to. "Millionaire or pauper," she added, "the man whom I marry—if I ever do marry—will have to be one whom I care for and who cares for me."

"Would you call me a pauper?" Fitzroy inquired.

"Oh, no; there aren't any paupers in the Guards, are there? Why do you ask?"

"Only because, as you know, I care a very great deal for you. It is for you to say whether I fulfil the other condition or not. Do I?"

To this somewhat unimpassioned query the girl returned no immediate reply. She had rested herself upon a low marble balustrade and was gazing over her suitor's head with a faint smile upon her lips. Not until she had been adjured a little more warmly to put a poor beggar out of his pain did she rejoin:

"It depends. You are so kind as to say that you care for me and that I know it; but I don't know it at all. Sometimes I have felt almost sure that you care much more for your cousin."

"For Cuckoo?—how absurd! Of course I am fond of her and I always have been, but I am afraid, if the truth were known, she positively dislikes me now."

Lady Elizabeth Tufnell was, by universal consent, sweet-tempered, but this disclaimer, which, it must be owned, was not very adroitly worded, caused her to look for a moment like a shrewish little minx.

"I really haven't the slightest curiosity with regard to your cousin's sentiments," she declared tartly; "we were speaking, I thought, about yours. Can you say, upon your honour as a gentleman, that you are not in love with her?"

"Should I be such a knave and such a fool as to ask you to be my wife if I were?"

"That," observed Lady Elizabeth, "is not an answer."

"Then let me assure you, if there is any need to assure you, that I am not in love with Cuckoo. I won't deny," continued the scrupulous Fitzroy, "that there was a time when I had hopes, or illusions, or whatever you like to call them; but I doubt whether there ever was a time when she wouldn't have laughed the idea of marrying me to scorn. Anyhow, that's ancient history, and I suppose every honest man, and every honest woman, too, would have to confess, if challenged, to some boyish or girlish attachments. As for me, I have nothing to conceal. You know all about me—or if you don't I'll willingly tell you—that there is to know."

He was subjected to a tolerably severe cross-examination before he received the admission for which he pleaded; but this was at length vouchsafed to him, together with the happy privileges of an accepted lover. Nevertheless, Lady Elizabeth was not quite magnanimous enough to refrain from trampling upon the fallen.

"I shall always believe," said she, "that that horrid girl—yes, she really *is* a horrid girl!—has been secretly setting her cap at you all this time, and that

she wouldn't have behaved as she has done with Mr. Carew if she hadn't hoped in her heart to make you jealous. In a sort of way, I am sorry for her; still, she has brought it upon herself."

"Brought what upon herself?" Fitzroy inquired.

"I don't like to call it disgrace, though I am afraid there is no other name for it. Unfortunately, everybody knows what Mr. Carew is; and besides—— But perhaps we had better not talk about it."

Fitzroy was not particularly desirous of talking about Cuckoo; yet he was rendered too uneasy by these hints to keep silence. "Has anything unpleasant happened?" he asked. "I heard to-day that the presentation had been put off, and I wondered why; but she declined to tell me."

A fugitive gleam, as of triumph, was visible in Lady Elizabeth's blue eyes; but all she said—and, everything considered, it sounded a kind comment to make—was "Poor girl!"

"Surely," exclaimed Fitzroy, "you don't mean that it has come to that! She may have been foolish, and I dare say she has; but—but, hang it all! she can't have been scandalous!"

Lady Elizabeth really did not know and sincerely hoped not. It was possible, however, that there might be objections unconnected with Miss Pennant's personal conduct to her being received at Court. Perhaps, if Fitzroy wanted to hear all about it, he had better ask his uncle.

"I don't in the least understand you," said the young man, frowning. "You seem to know something that I don't know; what is it?"

This unbecomingly peremptory demand would not, perhaps, have been complied with if Lady Elizabeth had not in truth been eager to acquaint him with the fact that his so-called cousin was a nameless nobody. As it was, the reluctance which she professed was soon overcome, and she said:

"Well, since you insist, I will tell you, though I am not sure that I didn't promise not to tell. But there ought not to be any secrets between us now, ought there?"

"I don't think there ought; and you may rely upon it that anything you say to me in confidence will go no further without your permission."

Thus encouraged, Lady Elizabeth regretfully placed her future husband in possession of a story which, if veracious—as there was only too good reason to fear that it was—reflected no great credit upon the head of his family. Authorities she did not quote, although authorities were doubtless available; she could only repeat to him what she had heard from her mother, and add that her mother, who was not easily taken in, had been convinced. "Of course Miss Pennant, whom I suppose we must continue to call Miss Pennant until we know what her real name is, can not be held responsible for our all having been so imposed upon—and I wish I had not called her horrid just now; I feel as if she ought to be forgiven anything and everything, poor creature! But it does seem to me that your uncle has been quite unpardonable! He might have known that the truth was sure to come out some day, and he might

have remembered that when it did come out he would not be the only sufferer."

"I don't believe one solitary word of all this!" declared Fitzroy stoutly. "There is no man in England who is less likely to be guilty of a fraud of any sort or kind than Uncle James."

But in the sequel he had to modify that uncompromising attitude a little. It was pointed out to him that there must, after all, be some reason for the abandonment or postponement of Cuckoo's presentation, and that if, as was to be hoped, Mr. Carew had nothing to do with this, the cause must be sought elsewhere. He was reminded, furthermore, that, supposing current rumours to be false, nothing would be easier than to prove their falsity, while mere obstinate incredulity could not help anybody. Finally, he was asked, with a touch of indignation, whether he thought that Lady Rochdale would commit herself, even under promise of secrecy, to statements which might not be readily authenticated.

That, to be sure, was exactly what he did think; still the suggestion had to be repudiated. "I am not breathing a word against your mother's good faith," he declared; "no doubt she relies upon the word of her informants. Only I can't accept it without at least knowing who they are. If you don't mind, I'll ask her."

"I don't mind a bit," Lady Elizabeth answered; "but perhaps you had better not ask too much of her in one day. You see——" She paused, with a pretty hesitation, and then resumed: "You see,

Fitz, my people have always thought much more of me than they ought, and although I believe they are really fond of you, perhaps they may not think you quite——"

"Quite worthy of my good fortune? Small blame to them, I'm sure, if they don't!" returned the modest aspirant. "Nobody can agree with them more heartily upon that point than I do. All I can venture to say for myself—and it's saying a good deal, isn't it?—is that *you* don't consider me unworthy."

In this way the conversation took a turn more appropriate to the circumstances, and vows of eternal fidelity were duly exchanged. These were doubtless sincere, although a very shrewd eavesdropper might not have felt absolutely certain that they would be kept, in the face of possible obstacles of one kind or another. For the young man's attention seemed to wander at moments, while the young woman was more inquisitive than she should have been so early in the business as to the precise amount of his income, actual and prospective.

Obstacles, at all events, were not raised by Lady Rochdale, to whom the news was speedily imparted by her daughter, and she was so kind as to squeeze Fitzroy's hand when he helped her into her carriage an hour later.

"Oh, jump in," said she, perceiving that he was waiting to be asked; "we brought you out here, and the least we can do is to take you back with us. Besides, you may as well see Lord Rochdale at once and fight it out with him."

"Is there going to be a fight?" inquired the young man.

Lady Rochdale laughed. "Well—did you expect to be welcomed with open arms? For my own part, I am quite ready to back you up; I happen to have a weakness for lovers in general, and for you in particular. But you can't be called ideal, and you labour under the disadvantage of being your uncle's nephew."

Her ladyship did not labour under any disadvantage in the shape of constitutional timidity or reticence. During the return drive she did nearly all the talking, and if her remarks caused one of her hearers to wince every now and then she did not appear to notice these symptoms of discomfort. She did not scruple to tell him that, in her opinion, he was an extremely lucky fellow, and that the projected alliance, supposing it came off, would raise him several pegs in the social scale; she had a word or two of condescending patronage to bestow upon his immediate relatives, and she added:

"As for the collaterals, I won't, of course, ask you to cut them; but I am sure you will understand that *we* can hardly keep up our acquaintance with Mr. Pennant after the outrageous attacks he has made upon Lord Rochdale."

Oh, the prophetic soul of Cuckoo! Fitzroy remembered so well her attribution to the speaker of the words almost identical with these that he broke out into an abrupt, untimely laugh which had not much ring of mirth in it. He was not invited to explain his discourteous hilarity, which was perhaps

drowned by the rattle of the traffic in the crowded street, nor did he deem it incumbent upon him to respond by any immediate protest. But he felt somewhat snubbed and chilled—possibly he may have been intended to feel so—and in any case he was not inclined to take that opportunity of putting the question which he had asked Lady Elizabeth's permission to put.

Lord Rochdale, into whose august presence he was ultimately ushered, received him in the dry, curt style with which certain permanent officials were disagreeably familiar. "I understand, Mr. Pennant, that you have paid my daughter Elizabeth the compliment of asking her to marry you."

"And she has paid me the compliment of accepting me," answered Fitzroy.

"Subject, of course, to my approval. Well, I will not go so far as to say that I entirely approve; but at the same time I shall not feel justified in withholding my consent, provided, in the first place, that you can satisfy me of your ability to maintain the sort of establishment to which she has been accustomed."

Fitzroy was afraid he could hardly do that without running into debt (it was notorious that Lord Rochdale was seriously embarrassed), but he stated what his actual income was and alluded to his expectations.

"Ah, well," observed the sour-looking, gray-headed man, "I suppose we must assume that your expectations will be fulfilled, although there is no reason why your uncle should not marry and

have a son. From the pecuniary standpoint, your demand is admissible—just admissible. But with regard to that uncle of yours, I may tell you at once that the idea of being connected with him by marriage is not pleasant to me."

"I can't help that," returned Fitzroy, who was becoming rather hot about the ears.

"No, you can't help that; but I think it advisable to mention at the outset that, for more reasons than one, I do not wish my daughter to be brought into contact with him and his—er—family."

"I dare say that they will not insist upon being brought into contact with her. When you speak of more reasons than one, may I ask whether you allude to rumours about my cousin—false rumours, in all probability—of which I have heard for the first time to-day?"

Lord Rochdale waved his hand. "My dear young man, I must decline to discuss rumours which it is no business of mine to investigate. I am entitled to make stipulations, and I make them, that is all."

"If you stipulate that I am to turn my back upon my uncle and my cousin, I can't agree," said Fitzroy firmly.

But Lord Rochdale, who had received instructions from his wife, was not so exacting as that. He merely wished it to be understood that this somewhat imperious young Guardsman ought to esteem himself highly favoured, and that the Right Honourable gentleman who had wantonly turned an enlightened ministry out of office must not expect

to be forgiven. About Cuckoo and her alleged false position he refused to say one word, repeating that that affair was no business of his. In the end Fitzroy was dismissed to announce to his betrothed the glad tidings that he was the bearer of the paternal sanction. What more could an ardent lover desire? and why should it have been necessary for the young man to pause on the staircase to pull himself together and compose his features into an appropriately joyful expression?

No satisfactory reply could be made to the latter question, so Fitzroy wisely dismissed it from his mind.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TURNING OF THE TABLES.

James Pennant returned home toward the close of a busy and harassing day to seat himself in his study and ruminate over private and personal affairs about which he had not, up to that moment, had leisure to think. And the more he thought about them the less their aspect pleased him. If there was one thing more repugnant to him, in private as well as in public life, than practising deception it was asking favours; his pride and his sense of duty shrank alike from concealments and from obligations. Yet, as matters stood, he must, it seemed, be guilty of the one and incur the other. The girl who was as dear to him as if she had been his daughter, and who could not have disappointed him more had she been what she was not, must at all hazards be shielded and kept in the dark. That much he owed, not only to her, but to his dead wife and his pledged word. But a man can not always pay what he owes, and what caused this despondent and eminently successful politician to doubt whether the prizes of existence make amends for the bitterness of its failures was the extreme improbability of Lady Rochdale's holding her tongue,

even supposing that persons in authority could be induced to hold theirs.

"One can't," he mused, "tell a direct lie in answer to a direct question. Sooner or later that question will be put to me, and then I shall have to speak out, whether I like it or not."

The question was going to be put to him sooner than he anticipated. A knock at the door (it was significant of their distant and formal relations that Cuckoo did not choose to enter his room without knocking) heralded the appearance of the intending questioner, who lost no time in accounting for her intrusion.

"I want to know," she began, "whether something that I heard this afternoon from Mrs. Arthur Pennant is true or not."

"Why," inquired James, "do you call your aunt 'Mrs. Arthur Pennant'?"

"Because if what she says is true she is no more my aunt than you are my father. Is that true?"

Here was the dreaded direct question with a vengeance! There was nothing for it but to reply sorrowfully, "I hoped you might have been spared this."

"It *is* true, then?"

"Yes, my dear, it is true. You are only my daughter in the sense that I have always looked upon you as being mine, that nobody else has any claim upon you, and that legally I stand toward you *in loco parentis*. I should have told you this before now, if——"

"And you have hidden the facts from me all

this time," interrupted Cuckoo with ominous calmness, "and you would have continued to hide them if they had not been discovered by outsiders?"

James made a sign of assent. "I considered that I was in duty bound to keep silence. I was about to say that that is why I have never enlightened you."

"Perhaps," Cuckoo went on in the same composed accents, "it is because the facts have become known to outsiders that Lady Wardlaw can't present me at the next Drawing-room?"

"We thought it best to defer your presentation because, by some means or other, rumours appear to have reached the Lord Chamberlain. As for the facts, I doubt very much whether they are really known to anybody, or capable of being proved by anybody in England, except myself. What, I imagine, has happened is that Budgett, who may have heard something in years gone by, has told what little she knows to Lady Rochdale out of spite, and that Lady Rochdale, with the same amiable motive, has repeated the story. William Wardlaw thinks—and, upon the whole, I am inclined to agree with him—that, under the new ministry, our secret may still be kept; and, for everybody's sake, it is better that it should be kept, if possible. It is not in any way a disgraceful secret; it concerns only ourselves, and, as I say, the formalities which make you legally my daughter were gone through long ago."

"You don't think it disgraceful, then, to take everybody in?"

A dusky flush rose slowly to James's cheek bones

and fixed itself there. "I don't," he answered, "think that I incur any disgrace by keeping my family affairs to myself and ignoring mere gossip."

"But what if you were questioned by those who had a right to question you? What if somebody wanted to marry me, for instance?"

"In that case, of course, I should at once acknowledge the truth, but I should add that I wished it to go no further."

Cuckoo's laugh was not a very pleasant sounding one to sensitive ears. "One begins," she remarked, "to see the difference between the goose and the gander. All my life long—ever since I was quite a small child—you have disliked and despised me for telling lies, and I have always acknowledged in my heart that you were right, because you yourself were so terribly, inexorably truthful. But deceit and prevarication are not the same thing as lying, I suppose. Not, at any rate, when they are employed by my betters."

James sighed. "I have done wrong," he confessed. "All I can say is that, having made a promise, it seemed to me that I ought to keep it. My wife, who was never happy with me and for whose unhappiness I was to some extent to blame, was not satisfied with adopting you; she made a great point of your passing as our own child, and I did not, all those years ago, foresee what trouble might arise out of complying with her wish."

This excuse, such as it was, did not avail to soften James's accuser. "The old story of Adam and Eve," was her comment. "You yourself don't like

apples, but you couldn't be so rude as to disoblige a lady. Well, one comfort is that nobody will doubt the nobility of your motives. When everything comes out I shall be the sufferer, not you."

That was so painfully like the truth—though so very far from being the truth—that he could only rejoin: "I hope everything will not come out."

"Surely it is a little too late in the day to hope for that. Ignoring what you call 'mere gossip,' or even swearing ourselves black in the face, will scarcely convince people now that we are father and daughter in anything but name. By the way, what *is* my name?"

He mentioned the plebeian patronymic which was hers by right of birth; he also related the history of her dead parents and spoke with somewhat more freedom than he had ever done before of his own. That, in his dry, dispassionate way, he made out a case for himself Cuckoo, sore and indignant though she was, could not deny; but—perhaps for that very reason—she felt no disposition to deal leniently with him.

"The long and the short of it is that I am an impostor," was the conclusion to which she gave utterance when he ceased. "I can't say that it consoles me very much to know that you are another. It is a little bit of a shock to me, you see. Sometimes—why shouldn't I own it now?—I have thought you unsympathizing and even unjust, but I have always believed that you were absolutely straight—and it doesn't do one any good to be deprived of these little illusions."

If she wished to make him smart, her words were well chosen. She could not have hit upon any more certain to wound him to the heart, nor could the worst of convicted criminals have looked more dejectedly humiliated than he did. Yet some perverse, fantastic cause or other—some inherent disability which was a part of the man—precluded him from casting himself upon her mercy and taking the first steps toward a reconciliation for which both he and she were secretly aching.

"I must accept any rebukes that you may see fit to address to me," he said coldly; "it stands to reason that I have no valid defence. Vituperation, however, will not help us much toward deciding upon our future course of action."

"Do we want any help? I should have thought that, since the murder is out, our course of action was beautifully simple. What is to be done? Answer, 'Nothing'—and we go up to the top of the class. At least, *you* do; as for me, I suppose I must be looked upon as *déclassée*."

"What I meant," said James in the same dry, level tone, "is that we can still choose between avowing all and remaining silent. I had made up my mind to remain silent because I hoped—absurdly, no doubt—that you would never hear what you have heard; but now the chief, if not the only argument in favour of silence no longer exists. What is your own wish in the matter?"

"My own wish!" broke out Cuckoo. "Oh, I haven't any wish—except that I had never been born, or that I could be obliterated!"

She was taking it very hard, it seemed. Somehow he had not imagined that she would take it so hard as that, and in his pity and remorse he lost hold over himself for a moment.

"Cuckoo!" he exclaimed, stretching out his hands imploringly.

Unluckily, his action brought back vividly to her memory a former scene in which she had played the part of suppliant and had been gently but firmly repelled. She recollected how, on a certain evening, she had nerved herself to confess that she had been backing horses, after having previously sworn that she had done no such thing, and how, in response to a timid appeal, she had been asked whether it was not time to go and dress for dinner. Now the tables were turned; now, as on that bygone occasion, she and her supposed father had to keep a dinner engagement, and the temptation to pay him out in his own coin was irresistible.

"It is getting on for eight o'clock," she remarked, "and I'm afraid I can't be ready to go out in less than three quarters of an hour. Hadn't we better adjourn the discussion—if there is anything more to discuss?"

At a large, dull dinner party—and large dinner parties are almost always dull—the philosophic guest can always derive some measure of entertainment from the trite but interesting reflection that those who sit at meat with him must of necessity be a set of more or less skilful actors. Mr. and Mrs. A. have very likely been fighting like cat and dog on their way to the festive board; poor B. can not have

forgotten that bankruptcy stares him in the face; C. has still in his pocket, perhaps, the letter which has informed him that his son has brought shame upon the family, while D., who is chattering to him so valorously and light-heartedly, may have heard her doom pronounced only a few hours back by an infallible physician. Yet they contrive, one and all, to keep up appearances, and if one did not know that the thing was well-nigh impossible, one would be inclined to say that they had not an ache or a pain among them. James Pennant and Cuckoo, like the rest of the world, brought unmoved countenances to the big banquet which they were bound to attend, and perhaps nobody present was either philosophic enough or well-informed enough to surmise that anything was the matter with them. That, however, did not preserve one of them from detecting, or imagining (it was in reality sheer imagination), a subtle change of manner toward her on the part of her next neighbours. They were saying to themselves, she felt sure, that it was tolerably audacious of her to be where she was, and that, under the circumstances, she would have given evidence of better taste by sending an excuse; they were commiserating her a little, admiring her pluck a little, laughing at her in their sleeves no more than they could help. The irony with which they congratulated her upon being the daughter of a personage so important and powerful as Mr. Pennant had become was not made too apparent.

Her method of retaliating upon two innocent gentleman who only wished to make themselves agree-

able to her took the form of a gay and somewhat reckless garrulity. She always knew how to be entertaining; she could occasionally be witty; her desire was to show them that she did not care a pin for them or anybody else, and she succeeded so well that they ended—neither of them being very young—by piously thanking God that they were not personally responsible for the words and ways of this very clever girl. James, who was watching her surreptitiously from afar, and to whom fragments of her conversation were wafted from time to time, groaned within himself. He, unhappily, *was* responsible for the clever girl—and a pretty mess he seemed to have made of his responsibility, first and last!

The big dinner was followed by a much bigger reception, for the hostess of the evening was a lady who aspired to revive the old-fashioned combination of social and political eminence, and the moment was a suitable one for the assembling together of all good Tories whose birth and standing justified a hospitable summons.

That Mr. and Mrs. Carew were included in the above category was proved by their arrival at a late hour, and that Julia was in no good humour was proved by the unusually chilly greeting which she vouchsafed to Miss Pennant.

"You have heard, I perceive," observed Cuckoo to Harry, who remained by her side after his wife had passed on.

"I have heard that your father goes to the Colonial Office," he answered. "My respectful felicitations!"

"You know I don't mean that. I mean that henceforth I shall be looked at askance by all sorts and conditions of people—though not by you, perhaps—and that Mrs. Carew has just fired the first shot."

He truthfully declared that he had not the least idea of what she was talking about, so she drew him away into a comparatively secluded recess to explain matters. Julia, it appeared, after the tale had been told, was in the sulks by reason of the familiar causes which never failed to produce that too familiar effect; if she had been rude to Cuckoo, it certainly could not be on account of her having heard what was news to her husband.

"If any hint of it had come to her ears she would have told me, and, to do her justice, I don't think it would have prejudiced her against you for a moment. Why should it? What, after all, does it signify?"

"You would have to be in my place before you could understand how much it signifies," answered Cuckoo. "It signifies so much to me that I simply can't bear it, that's all."

"Ah! there are so many things that one can't bear—and yet one has to bear them!" sighed Harry. "Between you and me, I can't bear Julia—but I must!"

An interchange of confidences followed. Julia really did seem, by her husband's account, to have been making herself almost unendurable, and we know what feats James Pennant had contrived to accomplish in a similar direction. What could be

more natural or more excusable than that two friends thus sadly situated should pour forth to one another grievances which they were precluded from imparting to anybody else? And the more they talked, the more sensible they became of mutual sympathy and comprehension. Harry, to be sure, did not quite understand why Cuckoo should threaten to relinquish the bitter bread of charity by a clandestine flight from Mr. Pennant's protection, nor did he believe in his heart that she would do anything so rash; but he did not hesitate to remind her of a certain conversation in the Green Park and of a promise to which he had committed himself on that occasion. He went so far, too, as to add:

"You know that you have only to breathe the word."

"Even though I have told you, and though that is absolutely true, that I could never by any possibility be in love with you?"

"Yes; upon no matter what terms! Oh, I am old and ugly, of course, and a fool into the bargain, but though you can't possibly care for me as I care for you, you do like me, and that is enough."

Cuckoo was more than half inclined to believe that it was enough. Ever since she could remember her one great wish and longing had been to be loved, and here was a man who loved her. Nobody else did, nor would anybody miss her if she were to vanish abruptly from London and England, as she had nearly made up her mind to do. And Harry Carew was just as unhappy, just as unlikely to be missed as she was. The immorality of annexing

another woman's husband was a drawback, no doubt; but when one is a mere waif and stray, with no relations to disgrace, such drawbacks lose something of their cogency.

"I wonder," she said presently, "what you would do if you were to receive a telegram from me some fine morning announcing that I had taken the key of the fields and that I was—at Jericho, let us say."

"I should secure a Cook's ticket for Jericho without one moment's loss of time," he declared.

"But seriously?"

"I couldn't be more serious than I am. I would follow you to the world's end!"

He looked as if he meant what he said, and she was fain to believe him, notwithstanding the excellent reasons that she had for doubting the good faith of the entire human race.

CHAPTER XX.

FLIGHT.

THE newly appointed Secretary of State for the Colonies was a sorrowful man as he drove homeward with his adopted daughter by his side. He did not feel able to say anything to her—although so much still remained to be said—and she certainly gave him no encouragement to renew their interrupted colloquy. Her loquacity puzzled and saddened him; he knew not what to make of the gaiety, genuine or assumed, which she displayed, and could only respond by grunts or monosyllables to her amusing criticisms upon the company which they had just quitted. It had been the privilege of her sex to puzzle him all his life long; among many other failures, he had conspicuously failed in his efforts to wean her from the characteristic ways of that sex, and now he could not in the least tell whether she was angry or indifferent, or reconciled to a state of things which only a few hours before had appeared to infuriate her. All he knew was that her laughter jarred upon his nerves, that she was making it more than ever impossible for him to tell her how bitterly he regretted the humiliation which his thoughtlessness had brought upon her,

and that he would be very glad to bid her good night.

That ceremony was gone through in the hall immediately after their arrival in Ennismore Gardens, and was unaccompanied by the customary kiss, which Cuckoo evaded by means of a quick strategic move toward the staircase. James noticed the omission, though he did not appear to notice it. Had he seen Cuckoo in her bedroom five minutes later, with her face buried in her hands, or had she seen him pacing restlessly up and down his study, with a furrowed brow, subsequent follies might perhaps have been averted; but since they were hidden from one another, physically as well as mentally, blind Destiny worked her will with the pair of them.

Blind Destiny and folly urged upon Cuckoo a course for which no excuse shall be attempted by the humble chronicler of her adventures. It was, no doubt, sheer insanity upon her part to resolve that she would not any longer be beholden to a man who had deliberately deceived her and who would evidently be only too glad to get rid of her once for all; yet a few very charitable persons may be willing to allow that there was a good deal of human nature in that impetuous resolution. What nobody can be expected to allow is that the circumstances warranted an appeal to the protection of Harry Carew, and the probable consequent desertion of the ill-used Julia.

Cuckoo, however, had not yet determined upon separating an already semidetached couple. She was glad—if the whole truth must be confessed—

to know that she had it in her power to effect that separation, but whether she would ultimately use her power or not continued to be an open question with her. On the other hand, she was absolutely and irrevocably set upon declaring her liberty and independence. Her plan of action, while she sat in the luxuriously furnished bedroom from which she had hastened to dismiss her maid, was not long in taking definite shape. To luxury, which had failed to bring her happiness (never having been without it she could not know what an admirable substitute for happiness luxury is), she was about to bid farewell; independence, she was convinced, lay well within the grasp of so accomplished a musician as she was, and if the worst came to the worst she would not starve. Her idea was that she would always be able to earn enough to keep herself alive by giving pianoforte lessons, even though she might not all at once be able to attract a paying audience to recitals, and that anticipation was, as a matter of fact, not unreasonable. If she had been a little older and a little wiser it would doubtless have occurred to her that her purpose might be attained by methods less dramatic than those which she proposed to adopt; but some allowance must be made for youthful predilections in favour of a startling exit. Before going to bed, therefore, Cuckoo spent some time in composing and writing out the following valedictory epistle:

"When you receive this I shall have left England, never, I hope, to return. As I am not English my-

self and have not a single English relation, there is no reason why I should—unless you call the imposture which I have innocently helped to keep up all this time a reason. You will acknowledge, anyhow, that it could not have been kept up much longer, and I dare say you will understand my being sick of it—and of other things.

"Please do not think it necessary to inquire where I have gone, or to put detectives on my track, for I shall not be found, and if I were, nothing would induce me to return to you. For the rest, you can not really wish me to return. Very much against the grain you have done what I am sure you thought was the best that you could do for me, and I have disappointed you as much as—excuse me for saying so—you have disappointed me. So I am certainly doing the best that I can for you by taking myself off.

"It will relieve your mind, perhaps, to hear that I am in no danger of destitution. I have money enough to pay my travelling expenses, and from the moment that I reach my journey's end I shall be well provided for.

"I would be glad if you would say something for me to Sir William and Lady Wardlaw, whose kindness I shall not forget. I don't think there is anybody else who would care about receiving a message from me. I ought also, of course, to thank you for having fed and clothed and educated me. I see now what a burden I must have been upon you from the first, and the only way in which I can show my gratitude is by relieving you of it for the future."

On reading over what she had written, Cuckoo was fain to own that it was an odious composition. But then, to be sure, she had quite meant it to be odious, so that there was no reason for hesitating to seal and stamp it. It was to be dropped into a letter box at Charing Cross the next morning, she had decided, and before it could be delivered in Ennismore Gardens she would be on the other side of the Channel. Then came the question—the really rather terrible question—of clothes and luggage. It would be possible, of course, simply to walk out of the house without saying anything to anybody, and take a ticket for Paris, but it would be miserably, almost unbearably, disagreeable to do such a thing as that. In all the great crises of life we are apt to find ourselves hampered and humiliated by the circumstances that we possess bodies as well as souls, and that the claims of the former can by no means be set aside in deference to the emotions of the latter. Our best-beloved dies, and our first duty is to send for the undertaker; we heroically and desperately resolve to blow our brains out as soon as ever the necessary revolver can be purchased, but before setting forth to buy it we must brush our teeth, shave and dress, as usual. And even a young lady who has determined to run away from home, never to be heard of again, must needs run somewhere and be provided with a change of raiment at her destination. So that really, upon the whole, one ends by wondering whether a fine mental attitude is open at all to creatures so materially circumscribed and weighed down as we are. Cuckoo

lay awake the whole night through thinking of this, clinching her hands, grinding her little white teeth, and wishing for the hundredth time that she had never been born into this wretched, incongruous, tragi-comic world.

It was perhaps a mercy that James had to breakfast early the next morning and leave the house immediately after disposing of a hurried meal. At all events, it greatly simplified matters, and enabled Miss Pennant, who had received several letters by the morning's post, to announce to her maid that she was going to spend a few days in the country with friends who had just invited her to do so. One may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and when, between ten and eleven o'clock, a four-wheeled cab bore Cuckoo away from Ennismore Gardens, the mass of superincumbent baggage which towered above her head would have aroused suspicion in any but a female breast. Neither the maid nor the other servants, however, thought much of that, and that the former was to be left behind had been accounted for upon the plea that the people with whom Miss Pennant was going to stay had filled their house from attic to basement.

So far so good. Cuckoo posted her letter at Charing Cross, despatching at the same time a telegram to Madame Voisin in Paris. For it was upon Madame Voisin's protection that she had decided to cast herself in the first instance, and, all things considered, her choice was not an unwise one. If any one could give her practical advice and put her in the way of earning her daily bread, this demure,

experienced little woman, whose whole life had been passed in an artistic and professional *milieu*, was the person to do it.

But Madame Voisin, grown old and gray-headed, was not—how could she be?—willing to accept the responsibility which it was sought to thrust upon her. She welcomed her former charge, indeed, with open arms; the room which Cuckoo had occupied in remote childish days was placed very heartily at her service (boarders being luckily scarce just then), and refreshment, moral and material, awaited the arrived traveller. When, however, explanatory statements had been made, the old lady could but shake her white curls regretfully.

"*Mon enfant,*" said she, "*ces choses-là, vois-tu, ne se font pas!*"

She could sympathise, she declared, with the impulse which had prompted Cuckoo's ill-advised flight, but she could not at all recognise the propriety of such a proceeding. Still less could she consent to aid and abet in schemes which, if carried out, would break the heart of her kind friend and patron, Mr. Pennant. Her duty, in point of fact, would be to inform him without loss of time that his daughter was safe and sound and under efficient guardianship.

"I call you his daughter, my dear child," she added, "because I am sure that that is what he wishes you to be, and, by your own account, he has the right to insist upon a father's privileges. You say he has deceived you, but the deception was intended to spare you pain, and it has not been a very cruel one, *voyons!*"

Cuckoo was sorry that she was quite unable to agree. "He deceived me, most reluctantly—one must render him that justice—in order to keep a promise which he would never have made if his wife had not been dying when she extorted it from him. It is not he who has broken it now, and it is not he, believe me, whose heart is in any danger of being broken. His heart, on the contrary, will be rejoiced as soon as he has made every endeavour to find out my whereabouts and has failed, for the truth is that he detests me."

"Ah, bah!" ejaculated Madame Voisin sceptically.

"Oh, I do not say that he has no reason. I am not the sort of girl whom it is possible for him to love, and it is not possible for him to like the sort of things that I like—or the people either."

"The people?" repeated the shrewd old Frenchwoman smiling. "That is more important—that gives a clew! Confess, now, *mon enfant:* this *coup de tête* of yours is not due so much to the discovery that you have made—a discovery of no great consequence, when all is said, *ma foi!*—as to your father's disapproval of some particular people, or, perhaps, of some particular person. Who is he, then, this particular person?"

It was in vain that Cuckoo protested against this grotesque misapprehension of her motives; Madame Voisin was persuaded that what she had to deal with was the case of a perverse and self-willed maiden, crossed in love; and, being so persuaded, she had nothing to offer, save soothing caresses and

assurances that all would end by arranging itself. If James Pennant did not receive a comforting telegram that same evening, this was only because Madame Voisin, who was unacquainted with his London address, could not obtain it from her guest. It was, nevertheless, obvious that she would ere long find means of placing herself in communication with so well-known a man, and she made no secret of her intentions. Consequently, Cuckoo, baffled and dispirited, took to bed with her the mournful conviction that her first string had snapped in her hands.

There remained the second string, of which, on the ensuing morning, she made sudden and desperate use. It was a string, she felt, which must needs be used suddenly if it were to be used at all, and anything would be better, anything would be less humiliating, than pursuit and capture by the man who was, it seemed, legally entitled to the custody of his adopted daughter. He would not, Cuckoo thought, with a bitter little smile, be eager to insist upon his rights when the telegram which she had despatched to Harry Carew should have brought about inevitable results.

Meanwhile the letter which she had posted at Charing Cross was producing results unanticipated by her prescience. Fitzroy Pennant, calling in Ennismore Gardens, shortly after it had been delivered, to make formal announcement of his betrothal to his relatives, found his uncle in so perturbed a condition that he had to reserve that piece of news for a more favourable occasion. His own perturbation,

on being taken into his uncle's confidence, was great and unfeigned.

"I'm awfully sorry, but I'm not much surprised," was his comment upon the various revelations made to him.

"You are not surprised?" echoed James. "Surely you ought to be!"

"Well, I am surprised to hear that the story is true; I didn't think it could be. But I don't wonder at her having taken it terribly to heart. She is very proud, you see."

"Ah! you understand her, perhaps, better than I do," said James, humbly enough, "and you blame me, I dare say, more than I had thought it necessary to blame myself. With the best intentions, I have, no doubt, been to blame; but that is of secondary importance now. What is important and urgent is that she should be traced and brought home at once."

"Yes—if that can be done," agreed the young man dubiously.

"You don't mean to say that you think it can't be done! One shrinks from raising a hue and cry, but——"

"Oh, there must be no hue and cry," interrupted Fitzroy with a decision which rather astonished one who was more accustomed to give orders than to receive them; "that would be fatal. Your object, of course, is to keep the thing dark, and it may still, with luck and care, be kept dark, I should hope."

"My object," said James, "is to find Cuckoo and induce her to return home."

"Yes; but you can't wish everybody to hear of her escapade and chatter about it. At present the servants think that she has gone away on a visit, and only the servants know that she has gone away at all. Suppose you were to do nothing and say nothing for the next twenty-four hours?"

James stared. "You have some idea in your head, I presume," he answered, "but I don't follow you. What is to be gained by giving her another twenty-four hours' start?"

Fitzroy was not prepared to say, nor did he feel disposed to mention the idea that he had in his head, but it struck him as rather odd that the same idea should have failed to find its way into a head so clear as that of his distinguished uncle. Either Cuckoo had decamped alone—in which case there was no absolute necessity for hurry—or else she had been so accompanied that hurry could not now rescue her from her fate. After some further parley, James was persuaded to promise that he would not for the present employ private detective agencies or give information at Scotland Yard.

"If you will make inquiries at the railway stations," Fitzroy said, "I'll take a rather wider cast, and depend upon it we shall puzzle out the secret between us. Anyhow, let us not admit the world into our confidence before we are obliged."

The wider cast which recommended itself to this astute young man led him, in the first instance, to Chesham Place, where he had the great satisfaction of ascertaining that Mr. Carew had just come home. Not having anything to say to Mr. Carew, he left

a couple of cards and went on his way rejoicing. The worst that could have happened had evidently not happened, so that a man might eat his dinner in peace and reflect at his leisure upon the next step that it behooved him to take.

Now, it so chanced that certain military duties prevented Fitzroy from taking any step at all until the luncheon hour on the next day, when his dismissed fears were brought back to him with a rush by the receipt of the following note:

"DEAR MR. PENNANT: Am I wrong in thinking that you called yesterday evening *for a particular reason?* You so seldom call here that I feel almost sure your visit *must* have been connected with a horrible catastrophe which threatens me and *your family.* Even if I am mistaken about that, I can not be mistaken in begging you to come and see me without a moment's loss of time. I have not yet sent any message to your uncle, but must do so unless you are here by four o'clock.

"Yours truly,
JULIA CAREW."

Within half an hour Fitzroy was seated beside the weeping Mrs. Carew and had perused a foreign telegram, addressed to her husband, which she confessed to have intercepted. She was authorized, she explained, to open his telegrams, which related, as a rule, to racing matters, and, as he was even now absent for the day at a race meeting, she had innocently made a discovery which would, she thought, shock

and grieve Cuckoo Pennant's relations as much as it had done her.

Shocking and grievous that flimsy slip of paper undoubtedly was, with its terribly unequivocal summons: "Have crossed the Rubicon. Come to me here by night mail. Will meet you at Gare du Nord in morning.—CUCKOO." There was no explaining away such a summons as that; yet Fitzroy did what seemed practicable.

"The fact is," said he," I tell you this, but I am sure you will be kind enough not to repeat it, that my uncle and my cousin have had a little difference, and that she has very foolishly run away from home. Now that we know she is in Paris we shall easily induce her to return, I have no doubt, and the whole silly business can be hushed up. As for this telegram to your husband, it probably sounds a great deal worse than it is meant to be. He has been a great friend of Cuckoo's, as you know, and I believe she has taken it into her head that she has hardly any friends. Most likely she only wants to consult him, and does not realise——"

"That," interrupted Mrs. Carew, blowing her nose violently, "is utter nonsense!"

"My dear lady, even if it were utter nonsense, we should have to make sense of it. Surely you must see that. But I don't for a moment admit that it is nonsense. Your husband, of course, would not have gone to Paris if the telegram had reached his hands; as a man of the world he would have perceived immediately that he could not compromise an inexperienced girl in that way. Still, it is de-

sirable for everybody's sake that the telegram should be destroyed, and if you will kindly excuse my tearing it up—thank you!—I will take the whole responsibility of having done so upon my own shoulders. Now there is no reason that I know of why another word should ever be said about the matter."

"Do you mean that, after what they have done—for it stands to reason that all this was preconcerted—they are to be allowed to escape scot-free?"

"Can you," Fitzroy inquired, "suggest any alternative that you would prefer? My cousin's character is, I admit, more or less at your mercy, but I can not think that you are seriously jealous of her or that you wish to spoil her life. And if it comes to the question of your own life——"

"Oh, that is spoilt already!" the long-suffering woman declared.

"Well, I don't know how that may be; but it seems to me, if I may take the liberty of saying so, that you have more to hope for from silence than from speech in this case. After all, you can't prove anything against Mr. Carew, and why should you wish to prove anything?"

"Why, indeed?" Julia sighed and reflected that she had not submitted to what she had so many times endured in order to kick the conjugal harness to pieces at that time of day. Nevertheless, she was of opinion that the deceitful Cuckoo merited some punishment, and she intimated as much.

"I think," answered Fitzroy dryly, "that there is a very good chance for her being punished. Suppose—but that is your supposition, not mine—she

really contemplated providing you with good cause for divorcing Mr. Carew, don't you think it would be rather a slap in the face for her to find that he has no notion of being divorced? And, in any case, isn't it certain that an uncommonly nasty quarter of an hour with her father awaits her? Oh, you need not be at all afraid of her getting out of this unscathed."

He himself was hardly chivalrous enough to wish that she should, yet he could not find it in his heart to transfer to the formidable Uncle James an appointment which Harry Carew had, happily, been precluded from keeping, and which might, without any insuperable difficulty, be appropriated by a less severe censor. Fitzroy hastened to solicit, and was successful in obtaining, leave to absent himself from London for a day or two, immediately after which he telegraphed to Ennismore Gardens: "All right. Have picked up scent and will wire again to-morrow. Keep quiet until you hear."

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE GOOD DAY.

The sun had but just risen above the mists that hung over the horizon when a young lady who ought to have been fast asleep in bed emerged noiselessly from the flat rented by blameless Madame Voisin, and hurrying down the common staircase had some ado to arouse a naturally indignant *concierge*. Orders from without and growls from within resulted, however, at length in the pulling of the string which opened a small door in the heavy gates, and presently Cuckoo stood in the broad, deserted street—an emancipated being, with the best part of the average duration of human existence still before her.

In another sense the best part of her personal existence probably lay behind her. She was well aware of that, and little inclined to look forward into the alarmingly uncertain future which, after due deliberation, she had chosen for herself. Yet, as she stepped resolutely on to meet her fate, she was sensible at least of that relief and exhilaration which follow the irrevocable casting of the die—convinced, too, that the decision which she had taken had been forced upon her by circumstances for which others were responsible. If in the recesses

of her mind there lurked also an exceedingly foolish exultation over the grief and remorse which her action would bring upon others, some of us—remembering our own distant childhood, when we used to put ourselves to extreme inconvenience, hoping thereby to plant a dagger in the callous hearts of our elders—will not be too hard upon her. Only in mature life do we acquire the melancholy certitude that "others" care a good deal less than might be supposed whether we are inconvenienced or not.

So Cuckoo, with head erect and chin defiantly thrust forward, traversed the highways and byways of a city which is always briskly matutinal and which on that lovely pearl-gray morning appeared to encourage her with a certain air of benevolent sanction and approval. She was, after all, a Frenchwoman who had returned to her native soil, and France, symbolized by those tall white houses, those sun-smitten roofs, those freshly sluiced thoroughfares, that indescribable smell of Paris which is to a Parisian what the skirl of the pipes are to a Highlander, seemed to be extending kindly thanks of welcome to her.

It was no Frenchman, to be sure, whom she was on her way to greet, nor, if she had dared to examine herself (but her valour did not extend quite so far) would she have found that she had any very enthusiastic welcome at his service. Like the inanimate objects to which she preferred to give her attention, he was a mere symbol, representing liberty, new departures, possibly a sort of revenge upon the past into the bargain. But when the little *voiture de place*

which she hailed after a time had deposited her at the terminus, and when she had been admitted to the platform at which the mail train from Calais must presently draw up, it became all of a sudden necessary to view Harry Carew under a less impersonal aspect, and with that dire necessity there fell upon poor Cuckoo an intense, craven longing to take to her heels. The longing, of course, had to be resisted, and was resisted; but if, by a miracle, her telegram of the previous day could have been recalled, nothing is more certain than that this bold *intrigante* would then and there have most thankfully recalled it.

Her heart thumped against her ribs as the huge, gleaming engine, with its long train of carriages behind it, came clanging and clattering under the glass roof. The doors were flung open, the passengers poured forth; she stood motionless, with cold hands, a throbbing head, and eager eyes—eyes that were eager, not to descry a well-known figure, but to detect its absence from the throng. And oh, what a thrice-blessed disappointment it was to ascertain beyond a doubt that Harry Carew was not one of those cross, sleepy, dishevelled passengers! Half a dozen explanations rushed at once into her relieved mind. The telegram had miscarried; Harry had been prevented from starting, or had missed his train—what did it matter? He had, in any case, missed his opportunity, and a second one should not —no, most assuredly it should not!—be granted to him. So thankful, so bewildered, so preoccupied was she that she never noticed the advance of a pas-

senger who looked neither cross, sleepy, nor dishevelled, and not until he was within two paces of her did she spring back, exclaiming:

"Fitz! oh, what has made you do this?"

"Don't you think that question would come rather more appropriately from me to you?" returned the young man, smiling.

With a quick gesture she raised both her hands to her temples, frowning at him in a puzzled way and stammering out some unintelligible words. She had turned as white as a sheet.

"For goodness' sake, don't faint!" he pleaded, in genuine alarm. "It's all right; I'll explain presently. The—the person whom you expected to meet couldn't come, so I've come instead of him."

"You have come instead of him?" repeated Cuckoo slowly. "Oh, no; that can't be true; that would be much too good to be true!"

Evidently she did not know what she was saying, and he took charge of her with a soothing firmness to which she submitted quite meekly. He had brought no luggage with him, he said, except the hand bag which she saw, so that there was nothing to prevent them from driving off at once.

"And I don't know how you feel, Cuckoo," he added, "but I'm awfully hungry. Suppose we go and have breakfast somewhere?"

There are occasional situations in real life which resemble dreams, just as there are dreams so ridiculously like reality that it is difficult afterward to disentangle them from the memory of actual facts. It was in a species of dream—a happy, reposeful

sort of dream, which it would have been a thousand pities to dispel—that Cuckoo was driven through the sunny streets of Paris, with Fitzroy seated by her side, and the queer thing (though it did not at the moment strike her as being queer) was that she neither interrogated him nor was interrogated by him. They made remarks upon the passing vehicles and pedestrians, she laughed at the uncouth French in which he addressed the driver; it was as if they had been out for a prearranged holiday together, and it seemed to be only in fulfilment of some pleasant, unobjectionable programme that they were landed at length in the courtyard of a big hotel, where Fitzroy gave sundry instructions to a white-aproned waiter, and whence, after a short delay, they moved to the adjoining restaurant. But of course such illusions, however agreeable they may be, can not be indefinitely prolonged, and Cuckoo, as soon as she had swallowed a cup of coffee and part of an *omelette aux fines herbes*, came abruptly to the point with:

"What does it all mean, Fitz?"

"It means," answered her companion, "that a misfortune which might have happened isn't going to happen, and that the less we say or think about what might have been the better. I can see by your face that you are glad; that's quite enough for me."

"Is it? Yes, I am glad—and grateful, too. But how and why has it come to pass that you are here? You said you would explain."

Explanations were, indeed, obviously required,

and he furnished her with them in language as succinct as he could make it. "Don't make yourself unhappy," he said in conclusion; "the whole stupid thing will be buried out of sight. Mrs. Carew has every motive for keeping what she knows to herself, and it is not I who shall betray you."

Cuckoo drew a long breath. "I suppose," she remarked presently, "you think that I did a very stupid thing when I despatched that telegram."

"Well, what do you think yourself? It would have been stupid and calamitous even if you had cared for that good-for-nothing chap; but as I am quite sure now that you don't care a button for him, why I must make so bold as to say that you have had an uncommonly lucky escape."

"Yes, but you see I thought he was the only friend I had in the world. How could I guess that you, of all people, would take so much trouble to save me?"

"I don't call that a very kind speech to make, Cuckoo, and I don't think I have deserved it either. You ought to know, if you don't know, that I would cut off my right hand rather than let you come to harm."

She gazed at him wonderingly and meditatively. Exaggerated though such a statement doubtless was, she liked to hear him utter it. It was pleasant, too, to be forced to recognise in him a fertility of resource and a capacity for taking command with which she had hitherto seen no cause to credit him. She did not, however, give verbal expression to the thoughts that were in her mind, but only asked, after a pause:

"And what are we going to do now?—for the rest of the day, I mean?"

"I don't quite know; it will have to depend. Where are you staying?"

It was with sincere satisfaction that he learned under whose unexceptionable wing she had been sheltering herself since her flight. He said that was first-rate, and proposed without further delay to reassure Madame Voisin, who was probably scared out of her wits by that time.

Cuckoo at first demurred, but ended by giving in. "After all, one may as well regain possession of one's clothes," she remarked, "and I can make up some story about my having gone out to meet you. Only, you know, Fitz, whatever happens, I am not going to stay with dear old Madame Voisin. She is a broken reed, unfortunately, though she has the kindest intentions."

"You are going, I hope," answered Fitzroy, "to return with me, either this evening or to-morrow morning, to your father."

"My father died, I don't know how many years ago."

"You are going to return to my uncle, then, if you prefer to call him by that name."

She pointed out to him so emphatically and decisively the utter inadmissibility of such a procedure, and she grew so agitated over it that he did not insist." All he stipulated for was that Madame Voisin's mind should be set at rest as soon as might be. "Then if the old lady doesn't object—and I don't see why she should, considering that we are first cousins——"

"But we aren't!"

"It's the same thing. I was going to say that, if she didn't consider it too *inconvenable*, we might drive out to the Bois or somewhere and spend a quiet afternoon together, talking matters over."

He left her for a few minutes, while he hastened into the neighbouring telegraph office, and when he reappeared she professed herself willing to obey orders. Perhaps she rather enjoyed receiving orders from that quarter; in any case, it would be as easy for her to proclaim her independence at one time as at another.

As for good Madame Voisin, no sooner did she behold the evasive Cuckoo turning up again, escorted by a young man of pleasing exterior, than she jumped to conclusions which did not lack plausibility, wide of the mark though they happened to be. Of course, she had to assume a mien of scandalized severity and rebuke conduct which, she declared, was of a nature to reflect discredit upon the establishment; but at the bottom of her heart she sympathized warmly with a couple whom she took to be thwarted lovers, and wondered what Mr. Pennant could have been thinking of to reject this handsome and well-mannered nephew of his. Nevertheless, she was not inclined to let Cuckoo out of her sight a second time, and only after Fitzroy had drawn her aside to make announcements which, if true, were at once tranquillizing and puzzling was she prevailed upon to sanction that projected expedition to the Bois de Boulogne.

"You bewilder me, monsieur," she frankly con-

fessed. "You came to Paris, you say, in search of mademoiselle—*ça se comprend.* But I do not understand your having sent the message that you speak of. However, if you will swear to bring her back to me before the evening——"

"Oh, *oui, je jure!*" answered Fitzroy, in his Britannic French. "Ce n'est pas ce que vous pensez; it's all right. Seulement il faut que je lui parle en—what do you call it?—in private, et il faut absolument l'amuser jusqu'à demain. Vous comprenez?"

Madame Voisin could not truthfully reply that she did, but she ended by accepting Fitzroy's word and allowing the young people to leave the house together—which, to be sure, was all that was required of her.

Something very much more difficult than that was required of the young gentleman who, with so fine a confidence in his own capacity, had undertaken the management of a ticklish job. He began to realize this soon after Cuckoo and he had established themselves comfortably on a bench in one of the more sequestered alleys of the Bois, for nothing that he had urged thus far in favour of a rational course had availed to shake his companion's resolution in the smallest degree. She did not, she confessed, know what was going to become of her, but she knew perfectly well what was *not* going to be her destiny, and she counselled him to waste no further breath upon advocacy of the impossible.

"I wouldn't go back for the world; but even if I wanted to go back, I doubt whether he would re-

ceive me, after hearing that I had done my best to run away with Mr. Carew. And he would certainly hear that, because the first thing I should do would be to tell him."

"What could have possessed you to dream of running away with a man whom you don't love!"

"Oh, it doesn't matter—but any woman could tell you. Men are different, I suppose; yet even men do incomprehensible things sometimes. Your being here at this moment, for instance, is rather incomprehensible to me, though I don't quarrel with you for being here, Heaven knows!"

"I shall always be anywhere at any moment when you want me, Cuckoo, if only you will give me a sign," the young man declared emphatically. "But, as a general rule, you prefer my room to my company, don't you?"

She made no answer; she was gazing absent-mindedly at the limited prospect of sunlight and shadow on the sward and at the trees beyond, which were stirred by a light breeze. Presently she remarked:

"There is no time like the present—except, perhaps, scraps of the past—and the future doesn't look particularly smiling. Suppose we make up our minds to enjoy to-day, which for all I know may be the very last of my pleasant days, and suppose we forget everything, except that you and I are the Fitz and Cuckoo who were the best of friends once upon a time? It seems such a dreadful waste of good hours that will never come back to spend them in useless argument? Do you think we might stay

where we are until evening, and then dine together at some restaurant? We could dine quite early, so as to give you plenty of time to catch the night mail for London."

"Yes; I don't see why we shouldn't," answered Fitzroy, after a momentary hesitation.

"That's agreed, then! And now, if you please, we won't say another word about disagreeable subjects."

That stipulation, it will be perceived, left them with a rather narrow range; but, somehow or other, it proved wide enough to content them. What did they find to talk about while the sun was sloping so deliberately, yet so inexorably, toward the west, and while the train which was bringing James Pennant to Paris to claim his adopted daughter was devouring space? Fitzroy would have been puzzled afterward to give any detailed account of their conversation; all he knew was that, whatever their words may have been, they were thinking about something else the whole time—something which became clearer and clearer as the hours slipped away—something which, alas! ought to have been made clear long before. Did she understand that he had loved her in the days of his clumsy puppyhood, that he loved her still, and would love her as long as his life should last? For his part, he understood well enough—he was too simple and straightforward to doubt it—that she had loved him all along and had only snubbed him for that very reason. Perhaps she did not care, now that they were upon the brink of parting, to disguise the truth; perhaps she was aware that there

were causes quite distinct from the mad resolution which she professed to have taken which must compel them to part. Anyhow, it behooved him, as an honourable man, to make some allusion to these causes, and he ended by doing so in an abrupt, constrained voice.

"By the way, you have heard, I dare say, that I am going to be married?"

"I heard," answered Cuckoo steadily, "that you were going to propose to Lady Elizabeth Tufnell; I did not know that you had actually done it. I hope you will be very happy with her."

That much, or something like that, had to be said, and nothing more was said. It was evident that Fitzroy was not going to be very happy, and equally evident that he must do his duty. As for Cuckoo, she had had a happy afternoon, which was now over; yet it had brought her something which would remain a possession forever, through good or evil fortune. Many of us, when all is said and done, find, as we near the grave, that such intangible possessions are our best and dearest.

In the meantime, that *tête-à-tête* dinner at a renowned restaurant could not be made a brilliant success, although Fitzroy took a good deal of trouble about ordering it. What sort of an appetite, indeed, could he bring to bear upon the delicacies set before him while he was inwardly cursing himself for the stupid blindness which had spoiled two lives? And the worst of it was that he could not help perceiving what a cruel disillusionment he had inflicted upon the girl whom he loved. She had evidently ascribed

his pursuit of her to motives which in truth existed (little as he had been aware of their existence when he set out, and what must she be thinking now of his officious interference!

Had he been able to read her thoughts, he would have discovered that she was neither incensed against him nor very deeply disappointed. She was even, in a sense, triumphant; for had she not gained all that it was possible for her to gain? If Fitzroy had been free and had asked her to marry him, she would certainly have declined the offer. It would, by her rather perverse way of thinking, have been entirely out of the question for her to ally herself with a family to which she had been falsely represented as belonging, and which desired—excusably enough—to see no more of her. It was, to be sure, permissible to regret that Fitzroy had chosen as his bride the particular person whom he had chosen, but at least there was no occasion to be jealous of Lady Elizabeth Tufnell. So Cuckoo played her part at the little banquet somewhat more felicitously than her entertainer, and when the time came to say farewell, she displayed a brisk determination to steer clear of sentimentality.

"Oh, no, you mustn't come back to Madame Voisin's with me," said she in answer to his proposal; "you must be off to the station, or you will be too late for your train. Don't look so suspicious; I assure you I have not the slightest intention of drowning myself in the Seine, and if you will call a *fiacre* for me I will proceed straight to my clothes, which I really can't afford to lose."

"And when you reach your clothes?"

"I shall take them away with me, I suppose. But not until to-morrow, and not surreptitiously. I am going to earn my bread somewhere, though I don't at present know for certain where, and I am quite capable of doing so. Consequently, you need not send me out into the wilderness with such a long face as that to remember you by."

Fitzroy had opened his lips to make some rejoinder when, to his deep discomfiture, he was hailed by a jovial old gentleman with whom both Cuckoo and he were slightly acquainted, and who at that moment sallied forth from the restaurant, followed by his wife and his two daughters.

"We saw you dining together," this tactless individual called out; "but you wouldn't look at us. How do you do, Miss Pennant? Is your father in Paris? What an original proceeding on his part to leave London in the very middle of a political crisis!"

"He has not left London," Cuckoo replied composedly. "I am staying here with an old friend."

Fitzroy showed less presence of mind. He stammered, reddened, and was so obviously uncomfortable that he rendered the indiscreet intruder equally so. The latter murmured that they were bound for a theatre and had no time to lose; the ladies, staring at Cuckoo in unconcealed wonderment, bowed stiffly to her as they passed out; the whole episode occupied barely a minute.

"What horrid bad luck!" ejaculated Fitzroy in great vexation.

But Cuckoo declared that it did not matter a bit. "In a few days everybody will know that I have disappeared, and I can't be accused of having disappeared with you, since you will be back in London to answer for yourself. Besides, London is heartily welcome to say what it pleases about me now. Goodbye, Fitz; think of me sometimes. I shall not forget you, you may be sure—nor what I owe to you."

She was in the *fiacre* and away before he could do more than squeeze her hand. That way of parting was perhaps as good as another, since part they must; but his heart ached as he gazed after the lumbering equipage. He knew, or thought he knew, that Cuckoo and he would meet again sooner than she expected; but he also knew that never more could they meet upon the old terms.

"Well, we have had one pretty good day," he sighed. "It isn't a big allowance, but it's all we are likely to get, either of us!"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SACRIFICE OF A PIS-ALLER.

We poor mortals are so constituted that after a really heroic manifestation of self-sacrifice, nearly all of us—possibly even all—begin to suffer from that reaction which is one of the conditions of our existence and to wonder whether we have not been rather geese for our pains. It always takes a little time, and sometimes a long time, to realize that one may easily resemble a more ignoble creature than a goose. Cuckoo, jolting toward her destination in the musty *fiacre*, and knowing full well what her prospects were, could not help dwelling with something akin to regret upon the prospect which she had resolutely cast away. At a word from her—why should she attempt or affect to deceive herself when she felt no doubt about the matter?—Fitzroy would have flung his plighted troth to the winds, would have left his Lady Elizabeth to console herself with some more congenial partner, and would have saved his own love, who loved him, from a life of dull, perpetual hardship. Conventionally speaking, it would, of course, have been dishonourable on his part to act in that way; but what, after all, are conventionalities worth? When it comes to the push, they are

not, in truth, worth quite so much as they appear to be; yet, such as they are, we can not ignore them with impunity, and doubtless it is well for us that we can not. Cuckoo, at all events, had the comfort of knowing that, in deference to them, she had punished herself far more severely than her unavowed lover. He would become reconciled to his lot, which was not an altogether unenviable one, as lots go, but it was inconceivable that she would ever learn to relish hers.

Madame Voisin came out to meet her upon the landing in answer to her ring. "My child, you have given us a fine fright! And I who have been expecting you since five o'clock! What have you done with your cousin, then?"

"He is not my cousin, and he has gone back to London," Cuckoo replied.

"*Vous m'en direz tant! Enfin! puisque vous voilà!*"

The good woman was evidently perturbed and excited. She did not listen to the excuses which were offered to her, nor did she give utterance to rebukes which had been fairly earned. Presently she threw open the door of her little *salon*, but shut it again quickly, without following Cuckoo, who advanced to find herself in the presence of a gentleman busily engaged in writing letters. He rose at once and laid down his pen, holding out both hands with what seemed to be an air of entreaty. But she shrank back from him.

"How did you find out?" she exclaimed. "What made you come here? Oh, I wish you hadn't!"

"Can't you forgive me, Cuckoo?" James asked.

She made no response to this appeal, for the rather humiliating reason that she was unable to control her voice. The surprise was too sudden and too complete; it came upon her at a moment when she was already overwrought and unfit to cope with fresh opposition. So, instead of coldly asserting her right to do as she pleased with a life which, when all was said, belonged to nobody but herself, she dropped disgracefully down upon the nearest chair and began to cry like a baby. Upon the whole, that was about the best thing that she could have done; but, naturally, she did not think so, nor did James Pennant help her to recover her equanimity by throwing his arm around her neck and kissing her wet cheek.

"Oh, don't!" she sobbed; "you wouldn't if you knew! It isn't that I regret anything. I don't regret what I have done, and—and I am going to do it still. It is only because I am so tired!"

In spite of this discouraging assertion, he did not remove his arm. He could be as gentle and affectionate as a woman upon occasion—did she not know that by previous experience?—and it was with womanly caresses that he soothed her now until at length she laid her head passively down upon his shoulder and her convulsive sobs ceased.

"So Fitzroy has gone back to London," he said. "That is just as well, perhaps, though I should have liked to have an opportunity of thanking him. You were asking me how I came to be here. Simply because his telegram arrived in plenty of time for me to pack up a few things and catch the second boat

train. I suppose he did not tell you that he had telegraphed?"

Cuckoo shook her head. "No, he never told me. But I might have guessed."

"And if you had guessed, we should not have met—is that what you mean? One understands why he kept his own counsel. He is a good fellow—a very good fellow!" sighed James wistfully, adding, after a brief pause, "I wish——"

He did not finish his sentence, nor, indeed, was there any need for him to do so, the nature of the wish to which he made allusion being so obvious. Cuckoo proved her comprehension of it by remarking: "He is going to be married to Lady Elizabeth Tufnell."

"Ah, well!" said James.

"I don't think it is exactly well; but it might have been worse, no doubt."

There was a rather long interval of silence, during which Cuckoo gently drew herself away and sat down upon a chair on the other side of Madame Voisin's stiff little centre table.

"You ask no questions," she resumed at last; "do you think we have come to the end of the chapter? Do you think we are going quietly back to London—you and I?"

"If I were to answer, '*Le roi le veut*'?" suggested James with a faint smile.

"Perhaps you could; I don't know what power or authority the law may give you. But you will not when you have heard the horrid thing that I must tell you now in as few words as I can. I don't

know whether I am sorry or glad—a little of both, I think—but I do know that I have made what you are thinking about utterly and for ever impossible."

"You may have made a bad shot at what I am thinking about. However, you shall speak first. Let me just send these letters, which are rather important, to the post, and then I shall be ready to listen patiently to any number of so-called horrid things. Only it would be a relief to my mind if you could begin by replying to the one question which I *have* asked. Can you forgive me?"

She gave him a little quick nod, swallowing down the troublesome obstruction in her throat, with which she was once more threatened.

"Then," James declared, "nothing else really signifies."

He left the room for a moment, carrying his letters with him, and on his return resumed his seat. "Now, be as horrid as you like," said he, smiling.

But Cuckoo had no responsive smile at his service. Evidently he knew nothing and suspected nothing; he was under the impression that a petulant, childish escapade could be blotted out and forgotten, that it would have no consequences beyond some possible, but not very probable, snubs on the part of certain leaders of London society, and that a fresh start might be initiated upon lines practically identical with those which had been abandoned.

"If you knew how difficult you make it for me with your generosity!" she exclaimed. "But you are like that; you have always been like that—and I am not like you. Ah, why should I be, when I

have nothing to do with you?—I who am the child of runaway parents and whose father was a low-born music master. Not that it becomes me to speak ill of them, poor souls! They at least ran away to be married, like honest people; but when I asked Mr. Carew to run away from his wife and join me here, I knew very well that I could never be what is called an honest woman again. No, not even if a divorce should leave him free to marry me—which it is not certain that he would have done. There, now you know it all. And Mrs. Carew knows it, and so does Fitzroy, and—and you see why you must let me creep away somewhere and hide myself."

She had placed her elbows upon the table and was resting her forehead upon her clasped hands. She did not choose to look at James Pennant; but although she steadily refrained from raising her eyes to his face, she could see as plainly as possible the expression which it must wear after such an announcement. It was not in the man to condone that sort of thing. Generous he might be; it had to be owned that he *was* generous and kind and forgiving. But he could no more help a certain wondering contempt and disgust for evildoers than he could help treating their evil deeds with severity. She had carried her point; assuredly he would neither order nor entreat her now to return to his home with him.

But although, as a matter of fact, he did not give utterance to orders or entreaties of that nature, he did something infinitely more surprising and unlikely. For he rose, laid his hand upon the girl's shoulder, and said quite quietly:

"My dear, you never intended to disgrace yourself, and if Carew had come when he was called—but you foresaw, perhaps, that he wouldn't—you would have sent him about his business as soon as he appeared. What you really wanted to do was to burn your ships—to be able to confront me with an argument which would sound irresistible."

With a sudden impulse she caught his hand and kissed it. "O, father!" she cried, involuntarily using a form of address which she had thought never to use again, "how did you know that that was what I wanted?"

But in an instant she recollected herself and went on hurriedly: "No, you are wrong; I thought he would come. I hoped he wouldn't, but of course I thought he would. I could not possibly foresee that my telegram would fall into other hands and that, by the happiest of chances, Fitz—oh, no! I can't escape through that loophole."

"Nevertheless, you call the chance that brought Fitzroy to your rescue a happy one."

"Yes—in one way. Still, the argument *is* irresistible, isn't it?"

James calmly admitted that it was. "I could not, under the circumstances, ask or expect you to return to England," said he; "but then it so happens that I did not propose, in any case, to ask that of you. The question—and it is the only question of any importance for either of us now—is whether you can forgive the injury that I have done you to the extent of consenting to live with me somewhere out of England."

Cuckoo raised her troubled, bewildered eyes. "I don't understand," she murmured. "You can't live out of England—you, a Cabinet minister!"

"I couldn't if I were a Cabinet minister, but I am not. I have just posted a letter to explain that private and domestic reasons compel me to decline the honour and to contemplate a somewhat prolonged residence abroad. So that obstacle no longer exists."

"You have never been so insane!"

"Oh, I am as capable of insane actions as another; little though you might suppose it to look at me, I really am," answered James, rubbing his hands, for he did feel that he had earned the right to enjoy himself this time. "The letter has gone, past recalling; my insanity will be manifest to Jane Wardlaw and others within the next twenty-four hours, and it will be positively dangerous for me to show my face in London until the whole business has blown over and been forgotten. You see, my dear, you are not the only person who knows how to set fire to inconvenient ships."

Cuckoo puckered up her forehead into anxious lines, while the tears slowly filled her eyes and brimmed over. "Why are you so good? It is dreadful of you to be so good!" she ejaculated, half laughing.

"I am not quite so good as I appear," he replied, "nor are you half as bad as you would fain have me believe you. My conduct, I grant you, must be pronounced inexplicable by anybody who does not possess the key to it; but the key, after all, is easily discovered. Perhaps, when found, it may even serve to

explain yours, which has been, you will allow, at least equally eccentric."

"It has been abominable—disgusting!" the girl cried. "But you have the key; you require no explanation. You know—oh, I never could have imagined that you were so clever!—you know why I have done everything I could think of to hurt you; you know that I care more for you than for anything or anybody else in the wide world!"

Was that the strict, exact truth? It was, at all events, a near enough approach to the truth to satisfy James Pennant, who took his adopted daughter in his arms and assured her—speaking, for his part, with absolute truth—that she could not have been more dear to him if she had been entitled by right of birth to bear his name. As for the sacrifice which he was making for her sake, it was the sacrifice of a *pis-aller*—neither more nor less than that.

"I went in for politics," he declared, in answer to her protests, "simply because a disappointed man must needs go in for something. I relinquish public life, and any prizes that it may have to offer, without a pang now, because——"

"Do you," interrupted Cuckoo, "dare to say that you are not disappointed in me?"

"I have that effrontery."

"Ah, then you would say anything, and you are beyond reach of argument! All the same, you are not going to be sent into exile a second time. Rather than that should happen I will return to Ennismore Gardens with you to-morrow morning."

But James Pennant had no intention either of re-

turning to Ennismore Gardens or of declining the stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds, for which he had already applied; and, as he was a resolute man, he ended by imposing his will upon one who was more emotional than obstinate. When at length Madame Voisin, whose patience had been severely taxed all this time, ventured upon a discreet reappearance, she was informed, much to her amazement, that her guests proposed to start for Italy the next day.

"For Italy!" she exclaimed. "But why for Italy, of all countries in the world, at this season of the year? Why not for England?"

"We think," answered James, "that England has had enough of us for the present, and we are sure that we have had enough of England. For the rest, Italy does not mean Rome or Naples. We are bound for a certain hotel that we know of on the Lago Maggiore, where we spent some weeks many years ago, and which we have taken it into our heads that we should like to revisit. We rather enjoyed ourselves there, didn't we, Cuckoo. Do you remember the lessons in the little dark sitting room, with the outside *persiennes* closed, and the boat in which we used to scull about among the islands after dinner?"

Cuckoo nodded, and left the room somewhat hastily.

"Her nerves are unstrung," James explained; "all things considered, that is not surprising. But change of air and scene will soon put her right, I hope."

Madame Voisin looked dubious. "And the

young man, the cousin?" she made so bold as to inquire. "What becomes of him?"

"He does not enter into the question."

"*Comment donc!* he does not enter into the question? Ah, dear Monsieur Pennant, forgive an old woman who has lived a long time and seen many mistakes made—some of them even, perhaps, by you! You have objections, I suppose, to your nephew. I do not ask what they are, but I implore you not to fall into the error of imagining that change of air and scene can work miracles. These two young people will not forget; I have watched them, and I know! You may part them, but you will never prevent them from adoring one another."

"You think that they adore one another?"

"*Dame! si vous les aviez vus ensemble!*"

James stifled a sigh. "It is you who are mistaken, my dear Madame Voisin," said he steadily; "you must have made up your mind to see something, and fancied that you saw it. In reality, my nephew is engaged to be married to a young lady of his own choice, and if his choice had fallen upon Cuckoo I should not have thought of opposing it. So you see that your imagination must have played a trick upon you."

"*Mais je n'y suis plus du tout, du tout!*" murmured the perplexed lady.

"I can sympathise with you," answered James; "I have not unfrequently found myself similarly situated. But in such cases I think—don't you agree with me?—that the wisest plan is always to keep silence."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FITZROY SPENDS A MOMENTOUS EVENING.

"At last," Lady Wardlaw announced to her husband, one sultry afternoon when the London season was at its height, "James condescends to communicate with me. I have a letter, dated from some place or other on the Italian lakes, in which he doesn't answer a single one of the questions with which I have been bombarding him all this time."

"That," observed Sir William, "does not surprise me. It is so easy to abstain from answering impertinent questions when you are safe on the other side of the Alps."

"My questions," Lady Wardlaw declared, "were anything but impertinent."

"Perhaps they were too pertinent, then. Well, what has he to say for himself?"

"Oh, nothing. When you come to think of it, what *could* he say for himself? He tries to say something for the girl—the same ridiculous, fatuous excuses about her health having broken down that he sent to his constituents and the newspapers. Then, of course, he adds that *I* shall understand what a severe nervous shock she has sustained and how he could do no less than take her away from scenes

and associations which she could no longer endure. As if somebody else couldn't have taken her away! I really am out of all patience with James."

"I have noticed for some time past that you are," observed Sir William placidly. "I don't blame you —and I am not sure that I blame him very much either. The whole business is too comic and too pathetic. A man sets up as a misogynist, won't have anything more to do with women, young or old, than he can help, and then they avenge themselves by playing the very deuce with his life twice over! *Ce que c'est que de nous!*"

"Pathetic it may be," Lady Wardlaw agreed; "where the comedy comes in I am too matter-of-fact or not cold-blooded enough to see. To fling away what James has flung away simply and solely because a girl who owes everything to him has taken it into her head that she would like to get out of the country is—oh, there aren't any words to describe such conduct! One can only assume that there is more behind it than we know of; I have thought so from the first."

She had been thinking so and saying so for several weeks past, and, as may be imagined, many other people had been doing likewise. A Cabinet minister does not, after all, throw up his position and his seat in Parliament in order to give his daughter, or his adopted daughter, the trip abroad which her state of health is alleged to require, nor could any reasonable being doubt that Mr. Pennant's sudden disappearance was due to causes more or less unavowable. Nevertheless, Cuckoo's secret had, so far, been

well kept. The fact that she had run away from home had, indeed, transpired—filtering, probably, through the usual back-stairs channels—but Mrs. Carew and Fitzroy Pennant had observed a discreet silence, while the latter's swift journey to France and back remained an episode unknown to anybody in London, save himself.

"I am determined to get to the bottom of it," Lady Wardlaw resumed. "If anything can be done for James—but I am very much afraid that nothing can now—the first step must be to find out how matters stand." She added presently, "The Carews are coming to dinner this evening."

Sir William raised his eyebrows. "Why?" he inquired with languid curiosity.

"In the first place, because I have invited them; in the second place, because I am convinced that Julia Carew knows something; in the third place, because Fitzroy Pennant is coming too."

"Again, why? if one may make so bold as to ask."

"Well, he shuffles his feet about and gets red in the face when his uncle and the girl are mentioned, and I don't know that that can be accounted for entirely by the brutal way in which the Rochdales keep rubbing their triumph into him. Then I noticed, the other day, that he made haste to decamp as soon as the Carews appeared, and I caught him glaring like a tiger at Harry's back as he went out."

"Whereupon you ask him to meet them!"

"Oh, only for my own satisfaction, and to confirm or dispel my own suspicions. Whatever I may

be, William, you will allow that I am not a scandal-monger, and any discovery that I may make will be kept to myself. All the same, one does wish to get at the truth."

Sir William shook his head. "I know very well what you wish," said he. "You wish to reinstate James—which is manifestly impossible—and you wish to pay out Lady Rochdale—which doesn't look altogether easy just now. I don't recommend you to imitate the action of the tiger and Fitzroy Pennant; I should rather advise you, if my advice had any chance of being accepted, to imitate the action of Brer Rabbit for the present."

"If *my* advice had been accepted when you and James consulted me, this catastrophe would never have occurred," returned Lady Wardlaw loftily.

Sir William thought he would go downstairs and smoke a cigarette before dressing for dinner. The above reproach had already been addressed to him more than once, and what more can a man say than that if he has made a mistake he is sorry for it?

Fitzroy Pennant had made rather a mistake in accepting his kinswoman's invitation to dinner, and very sorry he was for it when he was instructed to offer his arm to Mrs. Carew. He had for some time past been sedulously avoiding Mrs. Carew, who, as he was aware, had been not less sedulously endeavouring to obtain speech from him. He did not want to talk to the woman; she could be trusted, he hoped, to hold her tongue, and he had no information to give her upon a subject which was best ignored. But now, whether he liked it or not, he was in for a

good hour of her company, and his somewhat sullen discomfort did not escape the vigilant eye of his hostess.

"I have been wishing so much to have a few words with you," his neighbour began, as soon as the hum of general conversation protected her from being overheard. "I am sure you will be glad to hear that you were quite right in your surmise about my husband, and that I was quite wrong. He never had the slightest idea of eloping with that unfortunate girl; he was utterly taken aback and horrified when I told him of that telegram which you destroyed."

"Then you told him!" exclaimed Fitzroy indignantly. "I thought it was agreed between us that you were not to tell him."

"Oh, I don't remember making any promise. Besides, I didn't exactly tell him; it came out in the course of—well, it came out somehow, and I am only too thankful that it did, for I see now that I have been rather unjust to poor Harry at times. He acknowledges that he was a good deal to blame, but he never expected to be taken so literally as he seems to have been taken, and he says this will be a lesson to him. He is going to turn over a new leaf, and——"

"In other words," interrupted Fitzroy, with scant ceremony, "he represents himself as the innocent victim of my unscrupulous cousin. Well, that is a chivalrous line of defence to take up! It sounds so like the truth, too, doesn't it?"

Mrs. Carew plaintively expressed the surprise and

pain which it gave her to hear such things said. Of course Harry had not affected to be a victim, nor had he accused anybody save himself.

"Added to which we don't know—at least, *I* don't, and you said *you* didn't—that your cousin, as you still call her, really meant what her telegram appeared to mean. Your idea at the time, if you remember, was that she merely wanted to have Harry's friendly advice. Absurd as that sounds, it isn't absolutely incredible, I suppose."

"H'm!" grunted Fitzroy; "it will certainly be pronounced incredible, though, by everybody to whom you may betray—whom you may see fit to take into your confidence."

But Mrs. Carew was not dreaming of taking anybody into her confidence—except, indeed, Fitzroy himself, by whom she had expected to be met in a spirit just a little bit more sympathetic. She had, in short, arrived, by some means or other, at a reconciliation with her husband, and this was evidently a matter of far greater consequence to her than Cuckoo's fate or reputation could ever be.

"He actually came to church with me last Sunday morning," she gleefully informed her exasperated neighbour, who could not help growling out under his breath, "More shame for him!"

That Harry Carew deserved to have his head punched seemed to be beyond doubt, yet one can not punch a man's head without assigning reasons for so doing, so that the fellow was safe against assault. Perhaps he would hold his peace, and perhaps he wouldn't; there was no reliance to be placed either

upon him or upon his silly and easily pacified spouse, though the latter willingly gave all the pledges demanded of her. A less partial critic than Fitzroy Pennant may be permitted to point out that Harry Carew, however ignoble may appear the part which he played in this unfortunate affair, could have benefitted nobody by acting otherwise than as he did. It may be assumed that he was as much and as little in love with Cuckoo as he had been with innumerable other charmers; it is certain that he would never have cut his throat or hanged himself by the neck to please any of them; and it is probable that he continues to recognise, as he has ever recognised, the folly of quarrelling with his bread and butter. Possibly Julia, who represents bread and butter, is also the vicar of inexorable Nemesis; be that as it may, Mr. Carew passes nowadays for a reformed character.

The unphilosophic Fitzroy, however, being still young enough to rage against people and things for being what they inevitably are, went upstairs after dinner in a shocking bad temper. He had been bored and irritated by that senseless woman, he had subsequently been goaded up to the very verge of a hostile demonstration by her smiling, complacent husband, and when Lady Wardlaw bore down upon him, with the palpable intention of eliciting information, she met with the sort of reception usually accorded to an inquiring terrier by a badger whose seclusion has been invaded.

"I know nothing at all about it," snapped out Fitzroy in reply to initial queries; "I haven't heard from Uncle James since he left London, and I don't

expect to hear. If you are so eager to find out all about his private affairs, why don't you write to him? I thought you prided yourself upon being his bosom friend."

"Are you aware," asked the surprised Lady Wardlaw, "that you are an extremely bad-mannered youth?"

"I wasn't aware of it; I try to behave as decently as I can. But since you say my manners are bad, I suppose they are, and I won't inflict them upon you any longer. I should have to say good night now, anyhow, for I have got to go to a beastly ball."

Lady Wardlaw gazed after his retreating figure with a smile of appeased amusement.

"So his *fiancée* has ordered him to join her at a ball, and he calls the entertainment a beastly one!" said she to herself. "Poor boy! You haven't told me much, but you have told me rather more than you meant. Now, I wonder whether Harry Carew or his wife would be the right persons to apply to for the missing pieces of the puzzle."

Leaving Lady Wardlaw to decide that question by the aid of such wits as Heaven had bestowed upon her, Fitzroy betook himself to the mansion in Park Lane where, as had been correctly divined, he had an appointment to keep with the charming young lady who was ere long to become his bride. She was, by universal consent, a charming young lady, and he was—Lord and Lady Rochdale never allowed him to forget that—a very lucky fellow; but the mischief of it was that she had no charms at all for him. He had been forced to admit to himself that she had

none, and such admissions concerning a person with whom the remainder of one's life must be spent are necessarily dispiriting. He had found out, as engaged men sometimes do a little too late in the day, that his future wife had a temper; that she was vain; peevish, exacting, wrapped up in herself. To be sure, if he had been in love with her these trifling blemishes would have been invisible, or would, at any rate, have been described in quite different terms; but, unfortunately, he was not in love with her, and knew now that he never had been. That day in Paris—that delightful, disastrous day—had opened his eyes while closing his lips; illusions had ceased then and there to be manageable.

But what should always be found manageable by a man of honour, notwithstanding the impediments that belong to congenial honesty, is to stick to his plighted word, and Fitzroy clearly realized that no honourable way of escape lay open to him. He was prepared to discharge to the best of his ability all the duties imposed upon him, one of which led him, a good deal against his grain, to his present destination, a spacious, freshly decorated house, owned by people who had themselves been freshly decorated with a coronet, in recognition of their vast pecuniary merits. These were so generally and generously acknowledged by the gay world that to discover Lady Elizabeth Tufnell in so densely packed a crowd was a task of some little difficulty. However, her betrothed found her at last, engaged in animated conversation with the eldest son of the house—found her also, to judge by the cloud which gathered upon her

brow when she was accosted, in no very amiable mood.

"Stay where you are, please; don't move," said she in the somewhat sharp and acid accents which Fitzroy had learned of late that her voice could assume. "Mr. Schwale will bring me back here at the end of this dance."

So Fitzroy stayed where he was and watched her being dragged and bumped round the room under the unskilful guidance of the swarthy Semitic Teuton who would be Lord Bermondsey as soon as the actual holder of that title should see fit to seek repose in Abraham's bosom. He was not jealous of the Honourable Samuel Schwale, he was not jealous of anybody, nor did he in the least mind being kept waiting a long time. For the matter of that, he would not have minded very much if Lady Elizabeth had forgotten all about him and had departed for home or some other festivity, leaving him at his post, a neglected, conscientious sentinel.

But there was no fear or hope of her doing that. She had reasons for bearing his vicinity in mind, the nature of which was rendered startlingly and unpleasantly apparent to him when, after requesting him to conduct her to a sitting-out place, designed to accommodate two persons only, she opened fire point-blank with: "You know the Hanbury-Leightons, I believe. Perhaps you won't mind telling me when and where you saw them last."

Fitzroy made a grimace. "I suppose that means that you have already been told," he remarked; "I was in hopes that, as they had said nothing up to

now, they were going to be good-natured and mind their own business."

"They have been at Contrexéville; they only returned two days ago, and they called yesterday afternoon."

"Really? Then they can't be accused of having lost any time in letting you know that they came across Cuckoo and me in a Paris restaurant. What of it?"

"You don't deny that they saw you there, and that you and that—that girl were dining together alone!"

"Of course I don't deny it; I am not in the habit of telling lies."

"You are in the habit of deceiving those who trust you though, it seems. How came you to be in Paris? and why did I know nothing about it?"

"One isn't free to talk about family affairs," answered Fitzroy; "but, since these people have let the cat out of the bag, you are very welcome to hear the truth. Cuckoo, as you know, and as everybody else knows, foolishly ran away from home——"

"With you!"

"What nonsense! If she had run away with me, should I be here at this moment? I bolted off after her because—well, because I happened by chance to find out where she was, and my uncle, to whom I at once telegraphed, followed closely upon my heels. He reached Paris and I left the very evening that the Hanbury-Leightons saw us. As for my dining with Cuckoo, one must dine somewhere, and surely

two first cousins, one of whom is engaged to be married, may dispense with a chaperon!"

"You are not that girl's first cousin; you are no relation of hers."

"We were brought up as first cousins, anyhow, and I thought myself entitled to some of the privileges of cousinship. Now I have told you all that there is to tell, and I hope you are satisfied."

"I might be," answered Lady Elizabeth, "if I believed one word of your story. But I don't."

"Thank you. Then what, in the name of goodness, *do* you believe?"

"I believe," replied his *fiancée* with great deliberation, "that you ran away with your old flame—oh, she was an old flame of yours; you have admitted that. I believe that Mr. Pennant followed you to Paris and sent you back here, hoping that nobody would find out what you had done, and I know that he has carried his precious adopted daughter off to Switzerland or some such place, where they will remain, no doubt, until they think that there is no further risk of scandal."

"You can not really believe anything so preposterous. Admitting that I am a scoundrel, and that Uncle James is another, and that Cuckoo is no better than she should be, don't you see that such a course as you describe would be the very last we should be likely to adopt?"

"No, I don't," replied Lady Elizabeth doggedly and sullenly; "I don't see it at all. I think nothing is more likely than that he should wish his heir

to make a good marriage, and that you—upon second thoughts—should agree with him."

Fitzroy relieved his feelings by a gesture of disdain and disgust, but vouchsafed no articulated rejoinder.

"You told me once," Lady Elizabeth resumed, "that you were not in love with the girl whom you choose to call your cousin. Can you tell me that again—upon your honour?"

Once more Fitzroy was fain to remain silent, but this time he looked and felt a good deal less dignified than before. He divined that Lady Elizabeth wanted an excuse to throw him over, yet it was out of his power to assert now that he loved her or that he did not love Cuckoo.

"You are convincingly eloquent," he was presently told, in accents of withering scorn; "I don't know that there is anything more to be said, except good-bye."

"You mean that our engagement is at an end?"

"Well, naturally! It is disagreeable and humiliating for me, of course, but it would be ten times more disagreeable, and ten times more humiliating, to be your wife."

She rose and moved away, but Fitzroy hastily intercepted her.

"One moment," he pleaded. "I won't ask you to reconsider your decision; we haven't got on particularly well together—perhaps we aren't exactly suited to one another—and it is best that we should part. But don't let our rupture be accounted for on false grounds. There can not be any necessity for

dragging in Cuckoo's name or my uncle's, and it seems to me that incompatibilty of temper——"

"Oh, by all means, if you prefer to call it by that name. What I shall say is only that I have found you are not what I took you to be. You will have to square the Hanbury-Leightons somehow or other; but that is your affair, it doesn't concern me."

Well, yes, he would have to square the Hanbury-Leightons—or else ignore them and their indiscreet revelations. Upon the whole, it would perhaps be best to ignore them, since there might be some difficulty in accounting for his precipitate rush across the Channel without divulging what must certainly never be divulged with regard to Mr. Harry Carew. If the worst came to the worst he could at any time prove that Cuckoo had left London alone, and that he had telegraphed to his uncle immediately on discovering her whereabouts. Meanwhile he was a free man—voluntarily set at liberty by one to whom his word had been given, and to whom he had done no wrong. If he rubbed his hands as he quitted the halls of the resplendent Schwales, who can blame him? Of no mortal is it required to do more than his duty, and only a very select few are entitled to boast of having done as much. Nevertheless, it may have been somewhat premature on his part to assume, as he did, that all the rest was going to be plain sailing.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AU BORD DU LAC.

Those who choose to live in a fool's paradise have always been regarded with pitying contempt by the wise and prudent, and indeed there is not much to be said in their defence—unless, perchance, that it is worth while to live in a paradise of any kind, upon no matter what terms, if one can. Earthly existence, taken as a whole, is not so paradisaical an affair that mortals can afford to neglect such opportunities as may come within their reach of making believe that it is. So James Pennant and Cuckoo, upon the shores of their blue Italian lake, were right enough, it may be, to keep on proclaiming how happy they were, although one of them knew that the other could not really be so, although the pillow of the latter was frequently moistened at night by her tears, and although both must have been aware in their hearts that they had embarked upon an impracticable enterprise. A man in James Pennant's position can not reside permanently out of his own country, while a girl situated as Cuckoo was—well, her situation was not as yet very accurately defined, but she perceived, when she lay awake at night, that it would soon become necessary for her to define it.

Meanwhile the fugitive joys that belong to a truce were theirs. By mutual tacit consent, they tabooed contentious subjects; they pretended—sometimes so successfully that there was very little pretence about it—to ask for nothing better than a continuance of their present quiet mode of life; every day they were drawn nearer and nearer together, and if they had still a few secrets from one another, these might very well have been divulged without entailing any loss of esteem on either side. But in these days of admirably organized postal service the Lago Maggiore is not, after all, much farther away from London than the Highlands of Scotland, and thus it came to pass that on one and the same day these would-be recluses received an agitating letter apiece.

Lady Wardlaw wrote to her dear James to say that really this was getting beyond a joke. "If you have fled the country merely because Cuckoo was a little upset at discovering that she was not what she thought she was, she has surely had time to recover herself now, and perhaps to feel a little ashamed of having done her best to wreck your career. If, on the other hand, there has been something in the nature of a scandal, about which you have not seen fit to enlighten me, then the sooner you come home and face it the better. Because everybody here, I may tell you, believes that there *has* been a scandal. Harry Carew's name is freely mentioned in connection with it; his goose of a wife has been hinting things to me and others which I don't care to repeat to you. And now, these last few days, a report

had got about that Fitzroy is the culprit! Some people, it appears, actually saw him dining with the girl at a Paris restaurant, and, according to Lady Rochdale, he made no secret of the fact that they did. You know, I suppose, that his engagement is off. What *does* it all mean? A girl may be what you please—or what you don't please—but one can hardly imagine her eloping, or trying to elope, with two men simultaneously. I presume you can explain, and it seems to me that you ought to explain without loss of time. That is, if you think your adopted daughter's reputation worth the trouble of a journey to London. I am doing what I can, but it is not much that I can do while I am kept so completely in the dark."

Lady Wardlaw's homily, of which the above is but a brief excerpt, afforded James matter for anxious meditation. Of course he could explain—could, at all events, give a partial explanation—but the question was whether it would not be wiser to let distant tongues wag than to undertake the task of putting this or that liar to confusion. Liars might doubtless be forced to eat their words; but, unfortunately, there were two persons—Harry Carew and his wife, to wit—who had it in their power to reveal a most deplorable truth. All things considered, James felt disposed to await events. The breaking off of Fitzroy's engagement, of which this was the first intimation that had reached him, struck him as being one event which might possibly bring others in its train. He, therefore, allowed the post to go out without taking any reply from him to his correspondent, and

he had come to no decision when, toward evening, he took Cuckoo out, as usual, for a row on the lake.

It was their habit to go out every evening in the light skiff which he had hired, and the evening hours were always their happiest hours; but now, for the first time, Cuckoo was unable to affect the gaiety which she had hitherto contrived to summon up, with more or less of an effort. She was absent-minded; her eyelids were red and slightly swollen; once or twice she seemed to be upon the point of speaking, but relapsed into silence under her companion's interrogative gaze. At length James shipped his sculls, bent forward, with his elbows on his knees, and said:

"Something is the matter. What is it?"

The fact of his putting such a question proved the completeness of their reconciliation. A month or two earlier he would have noticed the signs of distress above mentioned, but would certainly not have remarked upon them. Nor, if he had, would she have answered, with a smile, as she did:

"Something is the matter with you, too, and I can guess what it is. You had a letter from Lady Wardlaw to-day, for I recognised the handwriting. Would you mind letting me see what she says?"

"I will show you her letter, if you like," replied James hesitatingly; "but, to tell you the truth, I would rather not."

"Well, I also have had a letter, from Fitzroy, which I will show you, if you like; but, to tell the truth, I would rather not. All the same, I know

that something must be said about these two letters. Both of them, I dare say, brought the same news."

"Jane's news is that Fitzroy's engagement has been broken off."

"Exactly so—and, besides?"

"Nothing besides that can be called news. She implores me, of course, to return home, and she alludes to rumours and gossip for which I take it that we were prepared, you and I. We could hardly expect to escape that sort of thing."

"So Fitzroy says. But ought not some of the rumours to be contradicted? Not for my sake—nobody can say anything worse of me than I deserve—but for his."

"Oh, certainly, if he wishes it. Does he wish it?"

Cuckoo made no reply. After a pause, however, she resumed: "Father" (she had begun, at his entreaty, to address him by that name once more), "I want you to advise me. I don't know what I ought to do, though I believe I know what I ought *not* to do, and I am sure I know what I ought never to have done. It was unpardonable of me to allow you to give up your office and your seat in Parliament."

"My dear child, you could not have allowed or forbidden a step which I made so bold as to take without consulting you."

"At all events, I am responsible for your having taken it, and I feel—I have been feeling all this time—that it *must* be retraced! There is no doubt that you will have to go back to England, and I think you

should go soon. The only question is, Am I to go with you or not?"

"Where I go you will go, and where you stay I shall stay," answered James. "I trust you don't find that prospect a very distasteful one, for I warn you that there is no evading it."

She laughed with the tears in her eyes. "Ah, it isn't that prospect that would be distasteful, if I had any right to accept it! But—O father, the truth is that I am a coward! I dread going back to England and facing all those people who know, or guess, what I have done. And then——"

"Then we won't go back to England; nothing is simpler."

Cuckoo endeavoured to show him that the dilemma, on the contrary, was a somewhat complicated one. It admitted, nevertheless, of a solution which he might, upon reflection, pronounce as satisfactory as any that could be discovered, although it would not perhaps commend itself favourably to him at once. Her idea, in short, was that the French stage would provide her with an interest and an occupation in life, while relieving him of what must always be a clog and an embarrassment.

"I should like it, and I believe I should succeed," she declared in conclusion. "We should meet as often as you could find time to run abroad and see me. I should not cease to be beholden to you, although I should no longer feel that I was a burden upon you, and I should never, never cease to think of you as my father."

"So that is the plan as to which you do me the

honour to request my advice," said James. "You have no alternative plan to suggest, I suppose?"

She shook her head. "Fitzroy's alternative isn't to be thought of. I didn't tell you that the object of his letter was to ask me to marry him. As if I could possibly do such a thing!"

"My dear," exclaimed James, whose breath was a little taken back by the welcome piece of intelligence thus calmly announced, "it is the very thing that you ought to do and must do, if you care for him!"

"How can you think so! If, after what I have done—and what I have done can't any longer be concealed, remember, unless Fitzroy is to sit down under a false accusation—I should disgrace you by acting as mistress of the house at Abbotswell, much greater would be the disgrace that I should bring upon him by becoming his wife. I didn't say that in writing to him, because it would have sounded as if I only wished to be contradicted; but——"

"You have answered him already, then?"

"Oh, yes, he was in a hurry for an answer. I think, do you know, that perhaps he will end by marrying Lady Elizabeth, after all. At any rate, it is only fair to them both that her reason for throwing him over should be shown to be no reason at all."

"Cuckoo, do you care for Fitzroy, or do you not?"

"Would you like to know what I said to him? I said that I cared very much indeed for him, and always had, but that there was only one man in the

world with whom I wanted to spend the rest of my days, and that, although that man's name was Pennant, his Christian name was not Fitzroy."

"Yet you propose to leave me and become an actress!"

"Ah, that is because I have no choice, not because I wouldn't spend the rest of my days with you, if I could. O father, don't you believe—don't you *know*, that I could never love anybody half as much as I love you?"

Such assurances on the part of grateful and warm-hearted children are not without precedent, but no parent in his sober senses ever dreams of taking them seriously. In the course of nature, the rival of all parents must one day step upon the scene, and his advent is a thing to be hoped for rather than dreaded. Still, Cuckoo's words were pleasant hearing to the childless man whose child she virtually was.

"Well," he said, "you are not going to leave me and you are not going to be an actress; let that suffice for the present. Eventually, though not for some time to come, we shall, I suppose, have to return to Abbotswell, which certainly will not be disgraced by our presence, but we need not bother our heads about the future yet. As regards Fitzroy, I will let him know that, so far as we are concerned, he is fully at liberty to exculpate himself. More than that we can't very well say or do, for Mrs. Carew's wishes in the matter must be taken into account, you see."

Not without a good deal of further discussion was

Cuckoo prevailed upon to yield, but at length she gave in, having, indeed, no valid reply to James's final argument, "You say that you love me best. Prove it, then, by giving me what I ask for."

There is a kind of love which surpasses the more or less transient emotion commonly known by that name, inasmuch as nothing can shake it, while it is, by its very nature, exempt from all taint of selfishness. But only when what are called the best years of life are past can man or woman make acquaintance with this. To young people it must needs remain a mystery. Sometimes, to be sure, they dimly realize its existence, and when this happens—it does not very often happen—the hearts of the elderly are prone to overflow with joy and thankfulness. So it fell to James Pennant's lot to spend a couple of supremely happy days, notwithstanding his regret that Cuckoo had been unable to prefer her faithful Fitzroy to him.

Upon the third day, however, the absurdity of being supremely happy at so belated a period of existence as his was rendered manifest to him. One evening, when Cuckoo and he stepped ashore after their accustomed row upon the lake, during which they had been amusing themselves with building all manner of airy castles, and planning half a dozen journeys into remote regions, they were accosted by a stalwart young Englishman who had just arrived from beyond the Alps, and it was easy to foresee—Cuckoo's eyes and cheeks supplied the requisite information—what was at hand.

"My dear fellow!" James exclaimed, clapping

his nephew affectionately upon the shoulder, "this is more than good of you! You didn't wait to hear from us, then?"

"I couldn't!" Fitzroy somewhat shamefacedly avowed. "I was afraid you might be off somewhere, leaving no address, and—and I have such a lot of things to say!"

"You ought to have waited!" cried Cuckoo in reproachful accents; "you have given yourself a tiring and expensive journey all for nothing."

But James paid no heed to her. "I have made myself so hot sculling," said he, "that I must really go in and change. You can follow me presently, you two; don't hurry yourselves."

Full well he knew that they would not hurry, and that plenty of time would be given him to change his clothes, smoke a solitary cigar, and watch the fireflies from the balcony while the stars came out, one by one, overhead. It was best so, and he would not for the world have had it otherwise, and that rapid side glance at Cuckoo's face which had revealed everything to him had given him at least as much pleasure as pain. Nevertheless, one does not without a passing pang relinquish the very last of one's day dreams.

Fitzroy and Cuckoo, left by themselves upon the little jetty, did not keep one another long in suspense.

"I'll tell you why I didn't wait for your answer," he began; "I was sure, when I came to think of it, that it would be a refusal."

Cuckoo made a sign of assent. "What else could you expect?"

"That's just what I mean. You couldn't be expected to tell me the real truth."

"Thank you; that is candid of you, if it isn't very flattering."

"Well, what *did* you say in your reply?"

"I can't remember exactly, but the gist of it was that nobody—not even you, much as I like you and grateful as I shall always be to you—would ever persuade me to leave my dear father, who has been much more than a father to me."

"Ah, there you are! I knew you wouldn't give your genuine reasons. Now shall I tell you your genuine reasons? In the first place, you had an idea that because my engagement had been broken off on account of you, it might come on again, and I was in honour bound to bring it on again if I could. Honestly, wasn't that your idea?"

"I certainly thought so, and think so," Cuckoo admitted.

"Well, Lady Elizabeth doesn't agree with you. She is going to be married to Sam Schwale, old Bermondsey's eldest son. The thing has been announced with what some people call indecent precipitation, but I can forgive the indecency of it in consideration of her having so completely made an end of your first obstacle. The second obstacle——"

"Is insurmountable; you know it is, Fitz! You think, perhaps, that a girl who has asked a married man to run away with her can't have much pride, but I assure you I have enough left to decline marrying anybody whose relations would, very naturally and properly, show me the cold shoulder."

"That, I am glad to say, doesn't apply to me, for my mother and my sisters are ready to receive you with open arms. I was to tell you so from them, and they aren't the sort of people to say what they don't mean. Any other obstacle?"

"Only the one which you will find mentioned in my letter when you read it. I don't want to marry anybody; I ask nothing better than to remain as I am."

The two young people were leaning over the rail of the landing stage, looking down at the clear water which broke in tiny waves against the wooden piles beneath them. "Cuckoo," said Fitzroy, edging a little nearer to her, "do you remember that afternoon in the Bois?"

"Yes, my memory extends as far back as that. Well?"

"Well, it may sound a conceited thing to say, but I don't much care if it does. I am certain that you loved me then."

"Did I? I wonder whether your memory is good enough to carry you back to a day ever so long ago, when we were children and when you took some trouble to explain to me that loving people is not the same thing as being in love with them."

"I recollect the incident perfectly, and what's more, I believe, though I won't absolutely swear, that I was in love with you at the time. Why do you hark back to it?"

"Because I should like to make you understand that even if I do love you, there is somebody else whom I should be a monster of ingratitude if I

didn't love more. You know what he has given up for me; you know—or perhaps you don't know, for I have only just found it out—that I am all he really cares for in the world. Is he to resign all that he has resigned only to be left in the lurch now for his pains?"

"But of course he will live with us," said Fitzroy cheerfully.

"In his own house, do you mean? You think we might really be so unselfish as to grant him that privilege. O Fitz, don't you see that, selfish as I have been—and few people, I should think, can hold a candle to me in that respect—I should eclipse my own record by marrying you? The long and the short of it is that I care too much for you and too much for him to be guilty of that crowning atrocity."

Selfishness is an ugly quality in the old; it is a good deal less unbecoming to the young, who in truth must needs display it to some extent, unless they wish to figure as abnormal specimens of the race—which is an unbecoming and provoking attitude for anybody to assume. About an hour later, Fitzroy and Cuckoo came in to cast themselves upon the mercy of the patient James, who knew what they were going to say before they said it.

"You are about," he remarked, as soon as he could get a word in, "to do precisely what everybody who has taken an interest in you, jointly and severally, has wanted you to do all along; apologies, therefore, seem to be rather out of place. You state that you are prepared to treat unavoidable gossip with contempt, so we won't breathe another word about

that aspect of the affair. As for me, I beg you to believe that, between you, you have removed a great load of anxiety from my mind. I may now fairly look forward to an old age of peace and happiness."

He did not, being a sensible man, look forward to sharing the home—Abbotswell, most likely—which was destined to receive the young couple; he was fain to say to himself, as he had said on a former occasion, "'Thou hast been, shalt be, art alone.'" But he knew—and if he had not known, Harry Carew and others could have informed him—that worse fates than that are quite easily conceivable.

THE END.

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